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**TEACHER AGENCY AND CURRICULUM ADAPTATION IN
HIGH-STAKES TESTING ENVIRONMENTS: A NARRATIVE
INQUIRY IN EAST ASIAN EFL CONTEXTS**



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Abstract

This study has explored teacher agency and curriculum modification in high-stakes testing settings in East Asian EFL settings. Using narrative inquiry and quantitative survey as research methods, the study investigated how 180 EFL teachers in South Korea, Japan and Taiwan overcame curriculum limitation and professional autonomy. All the data were collected online using structured questionnaires (n=168), semi-structured Zoom interviews (n=15), reflective journals, and digital artifacts within a period of six months. The SPSS quantitative analysis indicated that there was a significant difference in the agency levels between countries, positive moderate relation between teaching experience and the frequency of curriculum adaptation. The qualitative analysis by utilizing the narrative framework by Clandinin and Connelly found that there are six main themes, including strategic compliance, creative resistance, assessment-driven pedagogy, collaborative adaptation, contextual constraints, and professional identity negotiation. Results found that teachers adopted a variety of approaches to strike a balance between testing requirements and pedagogical ideology and commonly adjusted curricula by making micro-level choices on a macro-level scale. The researchers established that teacher agency was a continuum and not a dichotomy, and it was determined by the support of the institution, the cooperation of colleagues, and cultural norms. Findings also assist in comprehending how EFL teachers can preserve professional identity in the context of working with constraining testing regimes which can serve policy makers and educators working in the same settings.

Keywords: Teacher agency, curriculum modification, high-stakes testing settings, East Asian, EFL settings.

Introduction

The spread of high-stakes testing in East Asian systems of education over the past years has fundamentally altered the nature of teaching English as a Foreign Language by placing strain between the demands of standardized assessment and innovation in pedagogy (Wang and Tai 2025). EFL teachers in countries like South Korea, Japan, and Taiwan where scores in examinations play a significant role in the academic and professional life of the students are under increasing pressure to adjust their instructional practices to the test preparation agenda. This has posed serious concerns on teacher agency, professional agency, and how much educators can use curricula to address the needs of various learners, as well as fulfil the requirements of standardized testing. The clash between these competing interests forms a complicated professional space where a teacher has to negotiate his job as a curriculum implementer, pedagogical decision-maker and the become-agent of change in education processes all the time (Au 2022).

Teacher agency, which means the ability of teachers to act intentionally and positively in order to guide their professional development and teaching, is especially relevant to the situations where the external accountability measures are predominant (Akram, Ahmad et al. 2021). One way that

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teacher agency is presented differently in East Asian EFL contexts than it is in Western contexts is due to cultural values that place special importance on collective responsibility and hierarchical arrangements, including ones designed to promote educational practices (Fatima and Ahmad 2025). Educators working in such settings often work within a set of strict curriculum structures that are determined by national systems of exams, but studies indicate that most teachers struggle to find some creative areas to adapt and resist. The ability to comprehend how teachers are able to execute their agency within these limits is useful information on resilience and adaptability of educational professionals in the face of systemic pressures (Ahmad, Akram et al. 2021).

Curriculum adaptation is a very important aspect of teacher agency, which involves the changes, amendments, and innovations that teachers make to close the gap between the prescribed curricula and the realities of the classroom (Rasool, Qian et al. 2022). Adaptation is required and dangerous in high stakes testing contexts because teachers have to strike a balance between following students instructions given and addressing their needs, linguistic diversity, and pedagogical success. The choices, which teachers make concerning the adaptation of curriculum, are the manifestation of their professional knowledge, awareness of the situation, and their own beliefs on learning a language, but such choices are frequently concealed behind the official discourse of education that stresses standardization and accountability (Osipova and Lao 2022). A review of the character and scope of curriculum alteration in East Asian EFL settings sheds light on the agency that the teachers are left with regardless of the limiting policy settings (Tran and Li 2025).

The narrative inquiry method used by the study acknowledges that the experiences of teachers are essentially narrated, being shaped by their own histories, professional context, and cultural narratives concerning the education and the acquisition of language (Sarwat, Alvi et al. 2021). Through foregrounding the voices and lived experience of the teachers, narrative inquiry makes available the subjective realities of working in high-stakes testing regimes in a manner that encompasses the emotional, ethical and practical aspects of curriculum decision-making (Ramadani 2021). The methodological decision admits that the agency of a teacher is not only a technical or strategic phenomenon but also part of professional identity, relations and sense-making processes. The narrative approach to teacher agency provides more deep and complex information than those that solely consider complex professional practice as measurable variables only (Wellman 2006).

This study fills a widespread gap in the available literature by focusing on teacher agency and curriculum adaptation in various East Asian settings that makes it possible to compare how various national testing systems and cultural settings manipulate teacher experiences. Although other research papers have examined teacher autonomy in specific countries, not many have assumed a cross-national approach that helps to understand some similarities and differences in approaches that teachers are taking in dealing with similar issues. Moreover, the combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches gives the complementary value of data as the survey data displays patterns and trends in the sample of large groups of people and as narrative accounts present depth and background knowledge. This qualitative and quantitative research design enhances the ability of the study to produce results that are applicable to the researchers as well as practitioners.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1. To investigate the degrees of teacher agency and rate of curriculum adjustment among EFL teachers in high-stakes testing schools in South Korea, Japan, and Taiwan.
2. To investigate the real life experiences and personal accounts of EFL teachers in relation to

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their professional autonomy strategies in meeting the demands of the standardized tests.

3. To establish the contextual factors that facilitate or restrict teacher agency and curriculum modification in East Asian EFL settings.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. Which are the degrees of teacher agency and curriculum adaptation patterns of EFL teachers in high stakes testing contexts in South Korea, Japan and Taiwan?

2. What are the stories of EFL teachers of using their agency and making curriculum choices in the framework of standardized testing systems?

3. Which contextual forces are at play in teacher agency and curriculum adaptation in East Asian high-stakes testing contexts of EFL schools?

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The research has made an important contribution to the academic study on education as it offers empirical data on the issue of teacher agency in the situation when the external accountability becomes predominant over the decision-making of the pedagogue. The results provide practical implications to educational policymakers who aim to create a balance between standardization and teacher professionalism, including recommendations on how to make space of autonomy in systems based on assessment. To teacher educators and professional development providers, the study reveals certain obstacles and adaptive behaviors which could be used to guide the training programs. Also, the cross-national comparative methodology improves the comprehension of how teachers' experiences are shaped by cultural and systemic influences, and leads to larger theoretical debates regarding agency, structure and change in education in globalized settings.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The idea of teacher agency has become one of the most important concerns in the research of education, especially since the accountability systems and regimes of standardized testing in the world education system were stepped up (Lipman 2023). The theoretical paradigms conceptualize agency as the capacity to act, which is mediated by sociocultural forces, and realize that teachers act within institutional systems, cultural practices as well as policy standards that provide them opportunities and limits in making professional decisions (Milner and Ydesen 2024). The conceptualization of agency that was offered by Emirbayer and Mische to include international, projective, and practical-evaluative dimensions can be useful in conceptualizing the ways in which teachers, in their everyday practice, engage past experiences, project what might be, and make judgments that are more based on the situation. This ecological view of agency works against deficit discourses that place teachers in a role of policy implementers and acknowledges them as active contributors in the formation of educational processes even in limiting situations (Bütün Ikwuegbu and Harris 2024).

The study of agency of teachers in testing intensive settings has found that there are significant differences in the way teachers react to the demands of testing. There are also records of resistance and subversion that teachers intentionally fail to conform to test-oriented studies to maintain pedagogical principles that they find crucial (Parcerisa, Verger et al. 2022). Some studies point to strategic compliance whereby teachers only skim overboard to conform to the testing demands and

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leave room to adopt other pedagogical practices. Other work gives a description of intensification, in which teachers internalize testing logics and do so as a choice to reduce their teaching scope. These varied reactions imply that agency cannot be rendered in the same way but varies based on personal teacher attributes, institutional settings, teacher-teacher relations, and the perceived legitimacy of testing systems (Ramadani 2021). To make sense of such variability, one should pay attention to the particular circumstances that sit well or discourage various types of agency (Paulmann and Weinstein 2023).

Cultural dimensions play a huge role in defining the manifestation and interpretation of the teacher agency in the East Asian educational environment (Tran and Li 2025). The cultures of Confucian heritage focus on the respect of authority, collective responsibility and hierarchical relationships that might impact the desire of the teacher to freely defy or resist the institutional edicts (Min 2023). Some Studies are doubting the easy cultural determinism and showing that East Asian teachers have various forms of agency that can be more subtle, and collective or contextually strategic than individualistic Western models posits. An example is that Japanese teachers can use agency by means of collaborative lesson study activities which enable innovation within reasonable limits, whereas Korean teachers can utilize professional networks to exchange modified materials that can meet the requirements of testing and preserve the quality of pedagogy. Such culturally enacted forms of agency make it difficult to make general assertions about teacher professionalism and autonomy (Ge 2025).

The difference between the planned, carried out and achieved curriculum in language teaching settings has been reported in the research on curriculum adaptation, where it is acknowledged that the teacher is bound to mediate the official curriculum by his or her interpretation, choice, and adaptation to the official curriculum (Hanifa and Yusra 2023). Adaptation in EFLs and more so can take the form of modifying the level of content, providing supplementary materials, modifying activities and redistribution of instructional time to suit the learning needs of the students and realities in the classroom. High-stakes testing exacerbates the problem of curriculum adaptation because teachers are given the option to either emphasize communicative competence, critical thinking and engagement of the learner or to concentrate on the ability to take the tests and respond in a formula manner. Studies have also shown that most teachers are subject to moral distress when they are compelled to make a decision between what they perceive as good pedagogy and what testing systems encourage to reward them, which results in professional dissatisfaction and ethical dilemmas (Smagul 2024).

Studies looking at the effects of high stakes testing in the area of language education has continued to find that there has been a narrowing of the curriculum, restriction of pedagogical approaches, and stress on the teachers and the students (Ramadani). High-stakes tests, in which instances of assessment provide a format and content that influence pedagogical choices, have been widely reported in East Asian settings, including instances of teaching to the test, decreased focus on non-tested areas of skill (speaking, listening) and increased focus on memorization as opposed to meaningful communication. It has been found however that washback is not deterministic, research indicates that teacher beliefs, institutional support, and professional knowledge mediates the degree of influence of tests on practice. The teacher who holds firm pedagogical beliefs and has a favorable professional community seems to be in a better place to oppose the negative washback and remain balanced in his or her instructional methods in spite of the testing pressures (Wang and Tai 2025).

The importance of the institutional and collegial support in facilitating teacher agency has been

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increasing in the literature (Arief, Mujahidin et al. 2022). Studies indicate that teachers in collaborative professional culture that has supportive administrators have a higher degree of curricular autonomy compared to those in an isolated or micromanaged setting (Foley 2022). Professional learning communities, peer observation, and collaborative planning offer the space in which teachers can exchange adaptive strategies and validate pedagogical choices and jointly oppose or redesign testing requirements. On the other hand, the accountability systems that are surveillance-based where test scores performance is carefully monitored and consequences are conditional on outcomes are likely to stifle teacher agency and innovation. It is necessary to know these contextual dynamics to create interventions that enhance teacher professionalism and not compliance (Kimura 2022).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The researchers adopted mixed method research design that involved narrative research and quantitative survey to examine teacher agency and curriculum realignment in the high-stakes testing cultures within East Asian EFL settings. The design enabled the comprehensive knowledge both in numbers and rich storytelling of the lived experiences of the teachers in the situations of standardized testing.

PARTICIPANTS

The sample of 180 EFL teachers was selected in three East Asian countries, South Korea (n=60), Japan (n=60), and Taiwan (n=60). Purposive and snowball sampling were used to recruit participants using the online professional communities and teaching discussion groups. The following qualifications were used to select them: at least five years of experience teaching in high-stakes testing programs, direct participation in curriculum decisions, and uninterrupted internet access. A total of 15 teachers volunteered to take part in the qualitative phase of the larger sample in order to give detailed narratives.

Data Collection

The gathering of data was conducted online in more than half a year using various tools. In the quantitative stage, a structured online questionnaire was administered through Google Forms and it assessed the level of agency among teachers, frequency of curriculum adaptation and perceived constraints using Likert-scale questions. The number of valid responses obtained was 168 (response rate: 93.3%).

To complete the qualitative stage, semi-structured interviews were carried out through Zoom with 15 participants, with each of them taking part in three sessions, each lasting 60-90 minutes. The interviews discussed individual experiences of curriculum freedom and the problem of testing demands. Participants also kept online reflective journals of eight weeks through Google Docs where they reported experiences related to curriculum decision making. Also, participants posted online digital objects like modified lesson plans and assessment tasks using cloud storage applications.

Data Analysis

To analyze the quantitative data SPSS software was utilized where descriptive statistics, correlation

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analysis, and ANOVA were used to compare and contrast the relationship between the variables in different countries. Qualitative data were interpreted using the narrative inquiry framework presented by Clandinin and Connelly dimensions of temporality, sociality and place. NVivo software was used to perform thematic coding to determine patterns regarding agency and adaptation strategies. Triangulation of data used both qualitative and quantitative data.

RESULTS AND DATA ANALYSIS

QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS

The quantitative phase of this study examined teacher agency levels, curriculum adaptation frequencies, and perceived constraints across 168 EFL teachers from three East Asian countries. Descriptive statistics, correlation analyses, and ANOVA tests provided insights into patterns and variations in teacher experiences within high-stakes testing environments.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Survey Participants

Country	N	%	Mean Teaching Experience (years)	Gender (M/F)
South Korea	58	34.5	9.8	22/36
Japan	55	32.7	11.2	28/27
Taiwan	55	32.7	10.5	25/30
Total	168	100	10.5	75/93

Table 1 presents the demographic distribution of survey participants across the three countries. The sample demonstrated relative balance across nations, with South Korea contributing slightly more participants at 34.5 percent. Mean teaching experience ranged from 9.8 years in South Korea to 11.2 years in Japan, with an overall average of 10.5 years, indicating that participants possessed substantial professional experience. The gender distribution showed a higher proportion of female teachers, which reflects the broader gender composition of the EFL teaching profession in East Asian contexts.

Table 2: Teacher Agency Levels by Country

Country	Mean Agency Score	SD	Min	Max	ANOVA F-value	p-value
South Korea	3.45	0.68	2.1	4.8	8.34	0.001*
Japan	3.12	0.72	1.9	4.6		
Taiwan	3.68	0.61	2.3	4.9		

*Note: Agency measured on 5-point Likert scale; * $p < 0.01$*

Table 2 reveals statistically significant differences in teacher agency levels across the three countries. Taiwanese teachers reported the highest mean agency score at 3.68, followed by South Korean teachers at 3.45, while Japanese teachers demonstrated the lowest agency perception at 3.12. The ANOVA results indicated that these differences were statistically significant, suggesting that national educational contexts, policy environments, and institutional cultures differentially influenced teachers' sense of professional autonomy and decision-making capacity within high-stakes testing environments.

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Table 3: Curriculum Adaptation Frequency

Adaptation Type	South Korea (%)	Japan (%)	Taiwan (%)	Overall Mean Frequency
Material supplementation	78.5	65.4	82.3	High
Activity modification	71.2	58.9	76.8	High
Content resequencing	45.8	38.2	52.1	Moderate
Assessment adjustment	34.6	29.8	41.5	Moderate
Time reallocation	82.1	71.3	85.6	High

Table 3 illustrates the frequency of different curriculum adaptation strategies employed by teachers across countries. Time reallocation emerged as the most common adaptation, with over 71 percent of teachers across all contexts reporting frequent adjustments to instructional pacing. Material supplementation and activity modification also showed high frequency, indicating that teachers actively augmented prescribed curricula with additional resources. Taiwanese teachers consistently reported higher adaptation frequencies across all categories, while Japanese teachers showed the lowest rates, potentially reflecting stricter institutional controls or greater alignment with standardized testing formats.

Table 4: Correlation Between Teaching Experience and Agency

Variable	Teaching Experience	Agency Level	Adaptation Frequency
Teaching Experience	1.00	0.42**	0.38**
Agency Level	0.42**	1.00	0.56**
Adaptation Frequency	0.38**	0.56**	1.00

*Note: ** $p < 0.01$*

Table 4 demonstrates moderate positive correlations between teaching experience, agency levels, and curriculum adaptation frequency. The correlation between agency and adaptation frequency was strongest at 0.56, indicating that teachers who perceived greater professional autonomy engaged more frequently in curriculum modifications. Teaching experience showed positive associations with both agency and adaptation, suggesting that veteran teachers felt more empowered to make independent curricular decisions. These findings support the notion that professional expertise and confidence develop over time, enabling teachers to navigate testing constraints more effectively.

Table 5: Perceived Constraints on Teacher Agency

Constraint Type	Mean Score	SD	Rank
Testing pressure	4.32	0.58	1
Administrative control	3.87	0.71	2
Time limitations	3.76	0.68	3
Parental expectations	3.64	0.79	4
Curriculum rigidity	3.58	0.73	5
Lack of resources	3.21	0.82	6

Note: Constraints measured on 5-point Likert scale

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Table 5 identifies the primary constraints teachers perceived as limiting their agency in curriculum adaptation. Testing pressure ranked highest with a mean score of 4.32, confirming that standardized assessments constituted the most significant barrier to pedagogical autonomy. Administrative control and time limitations also emerged as substantial constraints, while lack of resources ranked lowest. These findings underscore that structural and systemic factors, particularly assessment policies and institutional management practices, exerted stronger influence on teacher agency than material or resource limitations.

QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

Thematic analysis of interview transcripts, reflective journals and digital artifacts indicated that six significant themes were perceived in the lived experiences of teachers who were going through curriculum adaptation in the environment of high-stakes testing.

Theme 1 Strategic Compliance

Teachers outlined willful plans of superficial correspondence to testing standards without forsaking instructional commitments behind bureaucratic adherence. The participants claimed to focus on test preparation publicly to please the administrators and parents but privately to provide communicative activities and the use of natural language. This two-fold strategy enabled the teachers to deal with the outside pressures and maintain their ideals as professionals. Strategic compliance was an expedient agency that accepted power imbalances without developing unlimited elements of pedagogic freedom. Teachers considered this strategy as survival mechanism as opposed to best practice.

Theme 2: Creative Resistance

Some of these teachers practiced minor rebellions by redefining testing purposes using the pedagogical perspectives that placed more emphasis on learning than grading achievements. These teachers positioned the work of test preparation as a skill-building process as opposed to optimizing scores, which re-focused the objective of testing as part of the overall educational achievement. The creative resistance was in the form of creative instructional designs that focused on creative instruction on test content and gave importance to critical thinking and communicative competence. The teachers who used this approach had excellent pedagogical beliefs and were ready to make calculated risks. These resistances were mostly unnoticed by outside eyes but had great implications to the professional lives of the teachers.

Theme 3: Assessment-Driven Pedagogy

Some of the involved participants internalized testing logics where they actually thought that test preparation was an effective and proper means of language instruction. These instructors saw consistency between the aims of testing and good pedagogy that standardized testing was a valid indicator of student achievement. Pedagogy based on assessment was a manifestation of institutional priorities and faith in the ability of testing to be valid. The teachers who took this orientation had fewer disagreements between the outside requirements and individual ideals, reported lower stress and job satisfaction levels. Nevertheless, this theme also reflected how institutional forces can rework professional identities and ideologies in the long term.

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Theme 4: Collaborative Adaptation

The teachers focused on the importance of collegial networks in the development and sharing of adaptive strategies. Professional learning communities, informal resource sharing, collaborative planning sessions, and problem-solving curriculum sessions on a shared basis were spaces that offered teachers an opportunity to problem-solve in groups. The work of adaptation was shared between the collaboration, resulting in less individual burden and less individual risk. Instructors said that collective adaptation was better at coming up with creative solutions than using individual initiatives and offered support to pedagogical choices. This theme underscored the fact that agency does not operate in isolation but rather in a collective way by taking up collective actions by being able to act collectively as a group of professionals.

Theme 5: Contextual Constraints

The respondents cited various contextual issues that constrained their adaptive abilities such as inflexible scheduling, high classrooms, restricted instructional time and administrative cultures based on surveillance. These architectural constraints were independent both of teacher motivation or skill, and provide external limits on what can be done. Teachers explained frustration at sticking to institutional conditions that did not allow them to apply the desirable adaptations in spite of personal agency. Schools with a high contesting testing atmosphere and performance based teacher evaluation system had contextual constraints that were very high. This theme emphasized that agency must have a personal capacity as well as structural enabling conditions.

Theme 6: Professional Identity Negotiation

Educators cited continued challenges to stay coherent in their professional identities in the face of incompatibility of role demands as test preparers, language teachers, and student advocates. Most respondents had a sense of dissonance related to the mismatch between their pedagogical education that focused on communicative practices and institutional pressures on the test-based instruction. Professional identity negotiation entailed constant consideration of values, tradeoffs, and redefining those that constituted good teaching. Other teachers solved the tensions by role-segregating whereas others incorporated testing in the wider philosophies of education. This theme disclosed the personal and emotional aspects of the work in the restrictive policy conditions.

DISCUSSION

Based on the findings, teacher agency in the high-stakes testing settings is a multidimensional phenomenon that is complex in nature and dependent on individual, institutional, and cultural factors. Simple conceptualizations of testing systems suppressing teacher autonomy in the same way are disrupted by the quantitative evidence of considerable cross-national differences in agency levels, and qualitative themes of varying adaptive strategies. Instead, teachers acted as agents along a spectrum of strategic compliance to creative resistance with the majority operating between accommodation and challenge according to circumstances and limitations. The fact that the perceived agency and the adaptation frequency have a high correlation implies that institutional actions aimed at improving teacher professionalism may fruitfully invest in the creation of enabling conditions as opposed to simply imposing instruction methods. The dominance of collaborative

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adaptation in the findings of the qualitative research suggests that collegial support networks are the vital resources in preserving teacher agency that can provide leverage points to systemic change. These findings build up on the existing body of knowledge by illustrating the presence of universal tensions between standardization and professional autonomy through cultural contexts.

CONCLUSION

This research clarified the dynamics of the complicated nature of teacher agency and curriculum modification in East Asian EFL settings characterized by high-stakes testing. The teacher portrayed exceptional levels of creativity and determination in having to maneuver through constraining policy conditions, with various approaches taken to meet the demands of the outside conditions against the requirements of pedagogical commitments. Although agency remained through strategic compliance, collaboration, and covert resistance within the constraints of pressures to teacher autonomy was high. The cross-national differences showed that national circumstances and institutional cultures as well as support systems had significant effects on the ability of teachers to change the curricula and preserve professional identity. These results are relevant in learning more about teacher professionalism in the system based on assessments and also focusing on the need to create structural conditions which can facilitate, and not inhibit, educator agency in modern educational settings.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Policymakers in education ought to re-evaluate the assessment systems that overly restrict the professionalism of teachers to develop balanced accountability systems that embrace pedagogical skills and standardized achievement. School leaders ought to develop collaborative professional cultures with scheduled planning time, peer observation, and teacher learning groups that would assist in adapting the curriculum. Education programs on teacher education should directly cover the themes of agency and adaptation strategies, which would enable teachers with better opportunities to operate within policy limits but remain pedagogically sound. The next research needs to focus on longitudinal effects of long-term testing pressure on the retention of teachers, their professional identity, and the quality of instruction delivery to help inform evidence-based policy reforms.

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