



## INSTRUCTIONAL DESIGN IN TEFL: CHALLENGES AND INNOVATIONS IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING

### DISEÑO INSTRUCCIONAL EN TEFL: RETOS E INNOVACIONES EN LA ENSEÑANZA DEL INGLÉS COMO LENGUA EXTRANJERA

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#### ABSTRACT

This article explored the evolving role of Instructional Design (ID) in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL), focusing on both challenges and a review of current practices. Drawing on diverse theoretical frameworks, such as behaviorism, cognitivism, constructivism, and cognitive load theory, the review examined how established instructional design models such as ADDIE, 4C/DI, and Merrill's First Principles have been applied in language teaching. Key challenges identified include limited teacher training in ID, contextual and cultural limitations, technological barriers, and institutional misalignment. In response, the review highlighted emerging innovations such as AI-enhanced learning, flipped classrooms, culturally responsive pedagogy, and collaborative instructional design. These developments reflect a transition towards more adaptive, inclusive, and learner-centered approaches to English teaching. The review concluded with implications for practice to further integrate instructional design into TEFL in meaningful and sustainable ways.

#### Keywords:

Instructional design, innovative pedagogy, language learning strategies, curriculum development, TEFL

#### RESUMEN

Este artículo exploró la evolución del papel del Diseño Instruccional (DI) en la enseñanza del inglés como lengua extranjera (TEFL), centrándose tanto en los desafíos como en la revisión de las prácticas actuales. Basándose en diversos marcos teóricos, como el conductismo, el cognitivismo, el constructivismo y la teoría de la carga cognitiva, la revisión examinó cómo se aplicaron los modelos de diseño instruccional consolidados como ADDIE, 4C/DI y los Primeros Principios de Merrill en la enseñanza de idiomas. Entre los principales desafíos identificados se incluyen la limitada formación docente en DI, las limitaciones contextuales y culturales, las barreras tecnológicas y la desalineación institucional. En respuesta, la revisión destaca innovaciones emergentes como el aprendizaje mejorado con IA, las aulas invertidas, la pedagogía culturalmente receptiva y el diseño instruccional colaborativo. Estos avances reflejan una transición hacia enfoques más adaptativos, inclusivos y centrados en el alumno en la enseñanza del inglés. La revisión concluyó con implicaciones para la práctica con el fin de integrar aún más el diseño instruccional en la TEFL de forma significativa y sostenible.

#### Palabras clave:

Diseño instruccional, pedagogía innovadora, estrategias de aprendizaje de idiomas, desarrollo curricular, TEFL



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## INTRODUCTION

Instructional design (ID) is now a critical foundation for effective professional development, driven by the relentless pace of technological and pedagogical change. The digital transformation of education necessitates that learners not only master complex cognitive skills but also can transfer and apply this knowledge to solve authentic, real-world problems (Dousay & Janak, 2020). In response to these demands, educational practitioners and institutions are leveraging evidence-based instructional design principles to systematically create flexible, engaging, and learner-centric experiences that are both scalable and effective (Stefaniak, 2021).

ID is not confined to a single domain. It is widely applied across various educational and training contexts, including K–12 educations, higher education, corporate training, technical instruction, and lifelong learning. It also integrates traditional and modern media, and often intersects with fields such as project management, human resource development, and educational technology.

Despite its proven efficacy across diverse educational domains, the strategic integration of instructional design (ID) into Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) is still an emergent and underutilized practice (Yalçın et al., 2022). The growing global demand for English language proficiency necessitates a shift away from traditional methods toward more innovative, adaptive, and effective instructional solutions. Systematically applying ID models, such as the ADDIE framework (Analyze, Design, Develop, Implement, Evaluate), offers a structured pathway to create personalized learning materials and evidence-based teaching strategies that can significantly enhance student engagement and outcomes in TEFL contexts (Parmaxi, 2023).

Within this context, this article explored the challenges and current practices associated with the application of instructional design in the field of TEFL. This study contributed to the ongoing dialogue on improving English language education through evidence-based instructional planning.

According to these ideas, the following research questions are proposed:

1. How are instructional design principles applied in TEFL?
2. What challenges hinder effective ID integration in language teaching?
3. What innovations are emerging in ID for TEFL?

## MATERIAL AND METHODS

This study employed a narrative literature review to synthesize theoretical and empirical research on Instructional

design (ID) in teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL). The review aimed to synthesize existing theoretical and empirical studies to comprehensively understand how ID principles are applied in English language teaching contexts, focusing on identifying key challenges and examining current practices.

### Selection Criteria

The sources for this study were selected based on their relevance to the intersection of instructional design, language pedagogy, and teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL). Previous foundational works were included to provide a theoretical foundation. However, publications published between 2010 and 2025 were prioritized, encompassing peer-reviewed journal articles and academic books.

### Search Strategy

The following academic databases such as ERIC, Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar served to find information for this article.

Keywords used in the search included:

- Instructional design in TEFL
- English Language Teaching and Learning
- Innovative Pedagogy in EFL
- Challenges in Foreign Language Instruction
- Current practices in instructional design

### The Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

**Inclusion:** The studies included in this review addressed instructional design models or strategies and included theoretical frameworks and applied research within the context of English language teaching.

**Excluded:** Articles not available in English, studies focused solely on general education without reference to language teaching, and non-peer-reviewed sources unless they provided significant conceptual insights.

### Data Analysis and Synthesis

The selected literature was analyzed thematically to identify recurring patterns, theoretical perspectives, and pedagogical innovations. The analysis focused on three core areas: Theoretical foundations of instructional design in language education, challenges in applying ID principles in TEFL contexts, and current practices in instructional design.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

According to the theory analyzed, instructional design (ID) is a systematic process based on educational theory and cognitive science with the purpose of creating effective,

efficient, and engaging learning experiences. Instructional design offers a systematic approach to aligning learning objectives, teaching methods, and assessment tools to focus on the needs of EFL learners.

### Theories underpinning instructional design.

Instructional design is based on three learning theories: behaviorism, cognitivism, and constructivism. Each theory contributes uniquely to language teaching design.

Behaviorism, a learning theory pioneered by B.F. Skinner, posits that learning is shaped by environmental stimuli and reinforcement of observable behaviors. Within Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL), behavioral principles are operationalized through structured practice activities such as pattern drills, dialog repetition, and immediate positive or corrective feedback (Kazu & Kuvvetli, 2023). These techniques are considered foundational for building automaticity and accuracy, making them particularly suitable for beginners acquiring fundamental lexical and grammatical structures.

Cognitive learning theory, largely attributed to the work of Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky, shifts the focus from observable behavior to the internal mental processes that facilitate learning. This perspective emphasizes the critical role of memory, perception, reasoning, and problem-solving in knowledge acquisition (Sawyer, 2022). In pedagogical practice, cognitive principles are applied through strategies such as providing instructional scaffolding and presenting information in a highly structured and organized manner. These techniques are designed to actively support the construction of mental models and schema, thereby directly facilitating students' cognitive development (Fathi & Rahimi, 2022).

Constructivism, a theory with foundations in the seminal works of Lev Vygotsky and Jean Piaget, conceptualizes learning as an active process where learners build new knowledge upon the foundation of previous experience within authentic contexts. In Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL), this student-centered approach is realized through pedagogical methods such as task-based language teaching (TBLT) and collaborative group projects that utilize authentic materials (Ansarin & Farrokhi, 2022; Ellis et al., 2020). The central aim of these activities is to immerse learners in purposeful social interaction and negotiated meaning, thereby facilitating deeper cognitive processing, meaningful communication, and critical reflection, which are hallmarks of constructivist learning environments.

### Instructional design models relevant to TEFL

In general terms, the ADDIE model is one of the most widely used within the TEFL context, as it utilizes five phases: Analysis, Design, Development, Implementation, and

Evaluation. This model is particularly valuable in TEFL for designing curriculum and instructional materials that are learner-centered and goal-oriented.

Merrill's First Principles of Instruction (FPI) remains a highly influential framework for designing effective instruction. Its core tenets mandate that learning is most robust when it is problem-centered and incorporates cycles of activating prior experience, demonstrating new skills, providing opportunities for application, and integrating knowledge into the learner's world (Merrill, 2020). The problem-centered and application-oriented nature of FPI demonstrates significant synergy with communicative language teaching (CLT) methodologies. This alignment is evident in CLT's emphasis on engaging learners in authentic, real-world tasks that require them to actively use the target language to solve problems and achieve meaningful outcomes (Gardner, 2021).

The Four-Component Instructional Design (4C/ID) model, developed by a group of researchers, provides a robust framework for training complex cognitive skills, a category that fully encompasses the multifaceted process of second language acquisition. The model's four interrelated components—(a) learning tasks based on whole-task practice, (b) supportive information, (c) procedural information, and (d) part-task practice—are systematically integrated to scaffold learning from novice to expert performance (Frerejean et al., 2019). This focus on progressively complex, authentic whole-tasks makes the 4C/ID model particularly apt for designing language curricula that require learners to integrate various sub-skills (e.g., grammar, vocabulary, pragmatics) into fluent and contextually appropriate real-world communication (Garcia et al., 2023).

Cognitive Load Theory (CLT) is a foundational framework in instructional design, premised on the architecture of human cognitive structures and the limitations of working memory during learning. The central imperative of CLT is to design instructional materials that manage intrinsic load, optimize germane load, and minimize extraneous load to prevent cognitive overload. In Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL), these principles are applied through strategies such as segmenting information into manageable chunks, leveraging the modality principle through visual aids and dual-coding, and providing extensive guided practice. Consequently, CLT provides a strong theoretical justification for using scaffolded instruction and carefully designed multimedia resources, which are essential for reducing the cognitive burden on novice learners and those with lower proficiency, thereby facilitating more efficient knowledge acquisition. (Anmarkrud et al., 2023)

## Recent applications of instructional models in TEFL contexts

Recent empirical research continues to validate the strategic adaptation of established instructional design (ID) models for enhancing Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL). For example, studies have demonstrated the efficacy of the ADDIE model in creating structured, student-centered online TEFL environments that can be tailored to diverse learner needs (Chen, 2022). Specifically, a quasi-experimental study found that an ADDIE-based approach to creative writing instruction significantly improved EFL students' performance in creativity, fluency, and self-expression by fostering a supportive environment for complex thinking. The model's utility extends to technology-integrated learning; a systematic review highlighting ADDIE's flexibility in designing digitally-enhanced language instruction that effectively improves student engagement and ensures alignment between objectives, activities, and assessments. Alongside the persistent use of foundational models like ADDIE, the field is also evolving towards more agile and heuristic approaches. Contemporary reviews note a growing trend where instructional designers leverage rapid prototyping and adaptive learning frameworks to respond dynamically to learner data and contextual constraints, moving beyond strictly linear ID processes (Stefaniak, 2021; Yalçın, 2022).

Empirical research across diverse EFL contexts demonstrates the consistent efficacy of Merrill's First Principles of Instruction (FPI) in enhancing specific language skills. A study with Saudi students revealed that a vocabulary module designed around FPI's activation and application principles significantly strengthened long-term lexical retention and improved learners' ability to use new words in appropriate contexts. Similarly, another study in 2021 found that integrating multimedia demonstrations and interactive practice exercises—core to the FPI's demonstration and application phases—within an online grammar course led to marked improvements in grammatical accuracy and heightened motivation among Korean EFL learners. Extending these findings to oral proficiency, research by Rahimi & Fathi (2022) on Iranian students demonstrated that the integration phase of FPI, which tasks learners with personalizing and reflecting on their learning, was instrumental in developing communicative competence. Their results indicated that the experimental group exhibited superior performance in fluency, coherence, and speaking confidence compared to the control group, underscoring the model's versatility in addressing various language domains.

The Four-Component Instructional Design (4C/ID) model has also been successfully adapted for language learning contexts, demonstrating its capacity to develop complex integrated skills. Some other empirical study implemented

the model through interactive self-presentation tasks in Chinese primary school EFL classes. The findings indicated that the whole-task practice and scaffolding inherent to the 4C/ID approach effectively promoted students' oral fluency, learner autonomy, and classroom engagement. This application aligns with the model's foundational purpose, as described by other authors, to facilitate learning for real-world tasks by seamlessly integrating constituent skills—such as grammar, vocabulary, and pragmatics—into holistic performance, thereby fostering long-term retention and transfer. The efficacy of this approach for complex learning is further supported by broader evidence; a systematic review by Frerejean et al. (2019) on the use of 4C/ID in higher education confirmed its effectiveness, suggesting its particular suitability for advanced EFL learners who are required to synthesize and apply multiple language competencies in authentic, complex scenarios.

## Emerging trends: Adaptive learning and AI integration

A significant emerging trend in instructional design is the integration of artificial intelligence (AI) and adaptive learning technologies, a shift influenced by learning theories suited for the digital age. While connectivism (Siemens, 2005) provides a theoretical foundation by conceptualizing learning as a process of navigating distributed networks of knowledge, the practical implementation is now driven by data. Instructional designers are leveraging AI to create dynamic, modular learning pathways that automatically adapt to a student's demonstrated needs and preferences in real-time. This evolution moves beyond traditional applications of constructivism and connectivism by using algorithms to personalize the learning environment, thereby fostering greater learner autonomy and enabling active interaction with intelligent digital content.

These advancements are particularly transformative for TEFL. Adaptive learning platforms are highly suited to on-line and blended language learning environments, as they provide the flexibility and learner-centered focus required for acquiring language in authentic, dynamic contexts. For instance, AI-driven systems can perform continuous analysis of learner performance and engagement metrics, allowing for the automatic adjustment of task difficulty and the presentation of targeted support in areas like vocabulary, grammar, and reading comprehension (Hwang et al., 2020). This capability for hyper-personalization ensures that instruction is tailored to the individual learner's zone of proximal development, making practice more efficient and effective (Mondragon, 2024).

## Challenges in applying instructional design to TEFL

While instructional design offers a structured, evidence-based approach to improving teaching and learning, its application in TEFL contexts presents challenges ranging



from teacher preparation, institutional support, technological integration, and student diversity.

### **Lack of formal training in instructional design**

A significant barrier to the implementation of formal instructional design (ID) models in TEFL contexts is that language instructors, while often highly skilled in pedagogy, typically receive little to no formal training in systematic ID frameworks (Stefaniak, 2021). This gap in professional knowledge can result in lesson planning that relies heavily on intuition, anecdotal experience, or adherence to prescribed curricula, rather than on evidence-based design principles (Yalçın, 2022). This issue is frequently compounded by a lack of institutional support and dedicated professional development opportunities focused on ID (Bond et al., 2020). Consequently, the process of instructional design is often misconstrued by educators as a bureaucratic or technical checklist—a perception that diminishes its value as a core pedagogical skill and reduces teachers' motivation to invest time in mastering it (König et al., 2020).

### **Contextual and cultural constraints**

A critical challenge in applying standardized instructional design (ID) models is their genesis in Western, often well-resourced educational contexts, which can limit their direct applicability to multilingual, multicultural, or under-resourced Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) settings (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020). For instance, a rigid, linear implementation of a model like ADDIE can be impractical in environments characterized by scarce technological resources, overcrowded classrooms, and a wide spectrum of learner proficiencies and backgrounds. In these realities, educators are often compelled to deviate from prescribed models, adapting and improvising pedagogical strategies based on immediate contextual constraints. While this practitioner knowledge is valuable, it can result in a significant gap between ID theory and classroom practice. This has prompted a shift in the field, where designers and educators are increasingly advocating for more heuristic, agile, and culturally responsive approaches to bridge this divide (Stefaniak, 2021b; Mondragon, 2024). However, effectively employing such flexible models necessitates a degree of expertise and institutional support that is often unavailable in the very contexts that need them most.

### **Technological challenges and digital literacy**

The global pandemic served as a catalyst for the rapid and often unprepared integration of technology into Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL), a shift that has starkly exposed persistent digital inequities. This emergency transition highlighted critical challenges in three areas: inadequate technological infrastructure, unequal student access to devices and reliable internet, and

varying levels of digital literacy among both educators and learners (Bozkurt et al., 2020). Consequently, many TEFL instructors were tasked with designing and delivering on-line instruction without sufficient pedagogical training for virtual environments or technical proficiency with relevant language teaching tools (König et al., 2020). This was compounded by significant barriers on the student side; learners in under-resourced regions particularly struggled to engage with digital learning platforms due to connectivity issues and a lack of prior experience with educational technology, thereby risking further marginalization (Bond et al., 2020).

### **Conflicts among instructional designers, educators, and institutions**

A significant point of tension in educational environments arises from the often competing priorities of institutional administration, instructional designers, and teaching faculty. Institutions frequently emphasize compliance with accreditation standards and scalability, which can conflict with the pedagogical goals of TEFL educators, who prioritize learner engagement, creative expression, and contextual relevance in their classrooms (Stefaniak, 2021). This fundamental misalignment can lead to the implementation of rigid, top-down instructional designs that are perceived as undermining authentic teaching and learning processes. Consequently, instructional designers are frequently placed in a mediating role, tasked with the complex duty of bridging this gap by supporting and training faculty who may be resistant to changes imposed by administration or who lack foundational knowledge in instructional design principles (Chen & Carliner, 2020; Vann, 2017).

### **Cognitive and affective load for educators**

The design and implementation of effective language instruction is a cognitively and emotionally demanding process, requiring TEFL educators to simultaneously balance a complex array of pedagogical, cultural, and logistical factors. These include aligning lesson objectives with linguistic outcomes, maintaining cultural sensitivity, fostering student motivation, designing valid assessments, and adapting to institutional constraints and evolving technological demands (König et al., 2020). This high cognitive load, without adequate institutional support or collaboration with instructional design professionals, frequently leads to educator burnout, chronic stress, and a consequent reduction in the quality of teaching and curriculum design (Bond et al., 2020; Chen & Carliner, 2020). The absence of a supportive design team exacerbates these challenges, forcing instructors into isolated and often unsustainable planning practices.

### **Examining current practices in instructional design**

The landscape of education has undergone a significant paradigm shift, moving from traditional teacher-centered

models toward dynamic, student-centered approaches that prioritize contextualized learning, interactivity, and the integration of emergent technologies like artificial intelligence, virtual reality, and learning analytics (Bozkurt, 2023). Concurrently, the field of instructional design has evolved from its systematic origins to embrace modular, data-driven, and adaptive learning pathways. These modern frameworks are theoretically grounded in constructivism and connectivism (Siemens, 2005), enabling the personalization of instruction to individual learner needs and preferences, thereby fostering greater autonomy, collaboration, and problem-solving capabilities. This evolution has fundamentally redefined the role of the instructional designer. As to achieve this goal, expertise now necessitates a command of digital pedagogy, a commitment to inclusive and universal design for learning, and the ability to leverage data analytics for informed decision-making. Consequently, the requisite competency profile for instructional designers has expanded beyond technical proficiency to include these strategic, pedagogical, and analytical skills essential for navigating the complexities of contemporary learning environments (Chen & Carliner, 2020; Stefaniak, 2021).

### **Technology-enhanced learning environments**

A transformative innovation in modern instructional design is the strategic integration of artificial intelligence (AI) and virtual reality (VR) to create dynamic English language learning environments. AI-driven tools, including advanced chatbots and conversational agents, can simulate authentic dialogues, provide immediate and personalized feedback on language use, and dynamically adapt instructional content to individual learner proficiency and needs (Hwang et al., 2020). Complementing this, immersive VR technologies transport learners into simulated, authentic contexts—such as a café or market—where they can practice communicative competencies in a low-risk setting, thereby significantly enhancing oral fluency and self-confidence (Chen, 2023; Parmaxi, 2023). Together, these technologies facilitate deeply immersive and interactive experiences that promote sustained engagement and support the acquisition of language through contextualized, real-world application.

### **Blended and flipped learning models**

A central aim of contemporary instructional design is the creation of modular and flexible learning pathways that can be personalized to accommodate diverse learner profiles, preferences, and paces. The flipped classroom model is a prime example of this principle in action. In this approach, students first engage with instructional content asynchronously, freeing up valuable class time for collaborative, interactive, and higher-order tasks facilitated by the instructor (Cheng, Yu-P.; Fathi & Rahimi,

2022). Research indicates that this structure effectively promotes learner autonomy, critical thinking, and deeper cognitive engagement, making it a cornerstone of modern English language pedagogy across various proficiency levels. The successful implementation of such technology-integrated models is further guided by frameworks like Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge (TPACK), which provides educators with a critical lens for meaningfully weaving technology into their specific content area and pedagogical strategies, rather than applying it as a mere supplement.

### **Culturally responsive and critical pedagogy**

A profound and necessary evolution in instructional design is the intentional integration of critical pedagogy and culturally responsive teaching frameworks into English language instruction. This shift represents a move away from culturally neutral or deficit-based models toward an asset-based approach that honors the rich diversity of multilingual and multicultural classrooms. Grounded in this principle, instructional designers are now charged with creating materials and learning experiences that not only reflect students' cultural backgrounds and linguistic repertoires but also actively encourage critical reflection on the relationships between language, power, and identity. This approach fundamentally challenges apolitical and standardized traditional models by insisting that effective and equitable instruction must prioritize students' lived experiences, local contexts, and agency, thereby positioning social justice as a core objective of language learning.

### **Innovative assessment practices**

The paradigm of assessment in English language teaching has significantly evolved, with instructional designers increasingly moving beyond traditional summative tests to implement continuous, formative strategies that measure higher-order thinking and practical language use. This shift is powerfully enabled by digital learning platforms, which facilitate dynamic assessment methods such as automated real-time feedback on writing and speaking, structured peer-review systems, and longitudinal e-portfolios that track development over time (Nguyen & Habók, 2022). These tools provide educators with a more nuanced, multi-faceted, and authentic view of student progress, capturing competencies that traditional exams often miss, such as fluency, pragmatic ability, and collaborative skills.

### **Collaborative Design and Professional Development**

Collaborative instructional design not only enhances pedagogical quality but also cultivates a profound sense of ownership, investment, and innovative capacity among educators, which is essential for developing sustainable and contextually relevant teaching practices. To effectively

build this capacity, contemporary professional development programs are increasingly structured around foundational innovation skills. These programs prioritize training in design thinking methodologies, advanced digital literacy, and critical reflective practice (Stefaniak, 2021). By equipping educators with this modern skill set, such initiatives empower them to systematically design, implement, and iteratively improve engaging and effective learning experiences that meet the demands of diverse student populations.

In general terms, the reviewed literature allows to analyze some key findings. For example, ID models like ADDIE and 4C/ID are effective but they require adaptation to local contexts. In this sense, teacher training and institutional support are critical for success.

## CONCLUSIONS

The literature reviewed in this study noted the increasing relevance of ID in the effectiveness of Teaching English as a Foreign Language. In the rapidly changing, multifaceted, and diverse educational settings, ID provides a method that can be both systematic and responsive to the needs of English language learners. One major lesson from the literature is the need for contextual responsiveness.

The ADDIE and 4C/ID frameworks are relevant in the EFL context, but their application in English language teaching requires educators to further their preparation in instructional design. This article also explored the evolving role of Instructional Design in English language teaching based on various theoretical frameworks, such as behaviorism, cognitivism, and constructivism. This review also examined how established models, such as ADDIE, 4C/ID, and Merrill's First Principles, have been applied within the context of language teaching.

Besides, the integration of collaborative design frameworks with Universal Design for Learning with represents progress toward more inclusive participatory teaching practices, as they empower teachers to actively design valuable learning experiences relevant to their specific teaching contexts.

## Implications for Practice

Teacher education programs should include foundational training in instructional design to equip language teachers with the skills needed to design effective, learner-centered instruction. Institutions and policymakers should support interdisciplinary collaboration between language educators, instructional designers, and technologists to foster innovation in TEFL. Curriculum developers should consider global ID models and local classroom realities to create adaptable and culturally responsive materials. Integrating Instructional Design (ID) into Teaching English

as a Foreign Language (TEFL) has significant implications for educational policy at both institutional and national levels. As the demand for high-quality English language instruction grows globally, policymakers must consider how systemic support for instructional design can enhance teaching effectiveness and learner outcomes.

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