



## The intercultural educator: the what, how, and why of teaching intercultural communicative competence in Latin America

*El educador intercultural: el qué, cómo y porqué de la enseñanza de la competencia comunicativa intercultural en Latinoamérica*

O educador intercultural: o que, como e por que ensinar competência comunicativa intercultural na América Latina

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### KEYWORDS

educator, intercultural competence, foreign language, teaching.

**ABSTRACT.** A reflective assessment of teaching praxis' notions and beliefs becomes essential in instructing learners to effectively interact in intercultural encounters. Arguments in favor of teaching the intercultural component have been promoted for years but have not fully reached systematic incorporation in foreign language education in Latin American countries. This paper examines the concept of the intercultural mediator, approaching key questions (why, what, and how) that emerge when integrating intercultural objectives in the language classroom supported on theoretical frameworks and insights from the authors' teaching experience. The methodology used was an exploratory qualitative document review. Scientific articles published in reliable databases were consulted to answer the questions targeting intercultural communicative competence teaching. The main objective is to invigorate the discussion regarding the intercultural component in the classroom while exploring practical ideas to teach it. Findings suggest that there is a growing body of literature and interest on approaching theoretical and practical standpoints toward ICC guiding teachers to become intercultural educators willing to integrate and enable learners with the crucial ICC competence. Educators can make a difference in the classroom by utilizing different Latin American resources and material to mediate intercultural matters in the foreign language classroom.

### PALABRAS CLAVE

competencia intercultural, educador, enseñanza, idioma extranjero.

**RESUMEN.** Una evaluación reflexiva de las nociones y creencias sobre la praxis docente es esencial para instruir a los alumnos con las habilidades necesarias para la interacción efectiva en encuentros interculturales. Los argumentos a favor de la enseñanza del componente intercultural han sido promovidos durante años, pero no han alcanzado una incorporación sistemática en la enseñanza de lenguas extranjeras en países latinoamericanos. Este trabajo examina el concepto del educador como mediador intercultural, abordando las preguntas claves (por qué, qué y cómo) emergentes al integrar objetivos interculturales en el aula de idiomas. La metodología utilizada fue una revisión documental cualitativa exploratoria. Se consultaron artículos científicos publicados en bases de datos fiables para responder a las preguntas en relación a la enseñanza de la competencia

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comunicativa intercultural. El objetivo principal es dinamizar el debate sobre el componente intercultural en el aula y ofrecer a los educadores ideas prácticas sobre cómo lograr ese objetivo. Los resultados sugieren que existe un incremento de la literatura e interés sobre la implicación de los alumnos con la crucial competencia intercultural, lo cual ofrece ideas sobre cómo los educadores pueden utilizar constructos teóricos y prácticos para convertirse en educadores interculturales. Los educadores pueden marcar la diferencia en el aula utilizando diferentes recursos y materiales Latinoamericanos para mediar asuntos interculturales en el aula de idiomas extranjeros.

#### PALAVRAS-CHAVE

competência intercultural, ensino, estrangeira, educador, língua

**RESUMO.** Uma avaliação reflexiva das noções e crenças sobre a práxis docente é essencial para instruir os alunos com as habilidades necessárias para uma interação efetiva em encontros interculturais. Os argumentos a favor do ensino do componente intercultural são promovidos há anos, mas não alcançaram uma incorporação sistemática no ensino de línguas estrangeiras nos países latino-americanos. Este artigo examina o conceito de educador como mediador intercultural, abordando as questões-chave (por que, o quê e como) que emergem ao integrar objetivos interculturais na sala de aula de línguas. A metodologia utilizada foi uma revisão documental qualitativa exploratória. Foram consultados artigos científicos publicados em bases de dados confiáveis para responder às questões referentes ao ensino da competência comunicativa intercultural. O principal objetivo é dinamizar o debate sobre a componente intercultural na sala de aula e oferecer aos educadores ideias práticas sobre como atingir esse objetivo. Os resultados sugerem que há uma crescente literatura e interesse em envolver os alunos com competência intercultural crucial, oferecendo insights sobre como os educadores podem usar construções teóricas e práticas para se tornarem educadores interculturais. Os educadores podem fazer a diferença na sala de aula usando diferentes recursos e materiais latino-americanos para mediar questões interculturais na sala de aula de língua estrangeira.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Over the last three decades, there have been efforts, especially in Europe, to promote education at all levels, a shift in their prioritized visions, objectives, and practices towards the inclusion of intercultural awareness. Learners are required to develop intercultural communicative competence to comply with the demands of the interconnected, challenging globalized world. Today, the need to reassess traditional notions in educating future generations has reached a point of no return where language teachers acknowledge their role in mediating and guiding learners to become competent intercultural communicators in a foreign language. These objective invites teachers to reassess their traditional views and teaching beliefs. Interacting and cohabitating with intercultural diverse people involve adopting new strategies, knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Intercultural competence requires training and awareness; it does not evolve naturally.

On the contrary, it requires constant preparation framed in a lifelong learning process. In this respect, the foreign language classroom represents a good place to start educating individuals on diverse intercultural worldviews and how language cannot be studied, neglecting the cultural component intertwined. Acquiring a language and being fully competent as a communicator requires understanding how to use and apply grammatical structures and forms; it implies understanding the invisible threads of notions, views, and practices. It takes the ability to place one's culture in perspective to understand and receive others' cultures from a different but open stand.

To succeed in shifting traditional language instruction to intercultural language education, the role of the teacher needs to be redefined to mediate intercultural communicative competence (ICC) adequately. In this sense, a conscious acknowledgment of the relevance of teaching ICC in the language classroom requires attention. Derin et al. (2009) observed that "teachers predominantly thought of teaching English for practical purposes, despite



the given options that were related with cultural issues” (p.1615). Readapting the training facilitated and its potential quality depends on the educators since they pull the strings that move the learning show. Teachers need to facilitate knowledge construction, skills, competences and at the same time serve as role models for students who might reproduce views, behaviors, and attitudes. “To be able to respond to this demand in their everyday practice, teachers need to develop and re-align their own way of thinking and acting in education to the changing context” (Savu, 2014, p. 112).

As complex as this may sound, there are theoretical approximations that intend to lead the way in helping educators to advance towards this objective. First, it is important to clarify the role language educators are to adopt, that of intercultural mediators. According to Skrefsrud (2020) educators are called to build intercultural bridges developing particular knowledge, attitudes, and skills that should be an integral part of teachers’ professional development. In a more general stand, educational institutions and their participants cannot neglect the intercultural realities around them. Intercultural teaching competence allows opportunities as well for educators and students to bond cultural and linguistic elements in the classroom, nurturing meaningful interactions that facilitate learning (Dimitrov & Haque, 2016). This kind of learning is crucial to interconnect in intercultural contexts and communicate assertively with others who hold different cultural backgrounds.

Present transformations portray a picture of the kind of future that awaits. Experts agree that the future will present individuals and societies significant challenges and opportunities that will continue redefining life on many different levels. Responding to current and future needs and demands in modern societies requires the development of intercultural communicative competence to overcome cultural barriers, especially now that Latin American countries are opening their economies to interrelate in the global market.

From an educational viewpoint, significant advances have been made in terms of discussing, proposing, and debating the relevance of the ICC component in foreign/second language classrooms. The movement to recognize language learning as a social construction of meaning and understanding has directed the field of language teaching to redefine the mere focus on language. It has opened a number of possibilities to dynamize the language learning experience while enhancing intercultural communicative abilities. The interrelation of language and culture benefits learners in linguistic, cultural, cognitive, and developmental ways.

Consequentially, this systematic literature review objective aims to discuss and present guidance on teaching and learning intercultural communicative competence (ICC) in the foreign/second language classroom to suggest practical teaching tasks that can serve the purpose of instructing gradually and progressively the ICC component. It is urgent to make more efforts to address the integration of ICC in Latin American countries in a more systematic way.

## 2. METHOD

This literature review scrutinized academic and scientific articles addressing the role of the language teacher in teaching intercultural communicative competence in the foreign language learning contexts. A qualitative document study is valuable and useful (Morgan, 2022). In specific, insights and guidance on the role of the educator in teaching the intercultural component language classroom. Peer-reviewed articles from language teaching and intercultural education journals and books were selected. Some of the databases consulted were Scencedirect, Latindex, and Google Scholar. Articles between 1997 to 2021 were preferably considered for the

analysis. Articles that did not address the role of the educator, specific reporting about how to teach the intercultural component in the foreign/second language class, and unsupported articles platforms were excluded from the analysis. The data search employed keywords such as “intercultural competence educator,” “intercultural competence teaching,” and “foreign/second language teaching”.

This qualitative research addresses the following questions: How can language educators facilitate the intercultural component in the foreign language classroom? How can language teachers integrate and maintain the Teaching of culture and adopt the role of an intercultural mediator? And what are some practical learning activities to mediate the intercultural component in the foreign language class?

### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

#### **Becoming intercultural mediators: ideas to approach the ‘what’ and ‘how.’**

In line with finding in the literature, ICC teaching is a complex but rewarding teaching experience with thought-provoking notions and positions. Results and findings provide valuable insights into the role of the teacher and the kind of praxis required to approach the intercultural communicative component in a language class.

Facilitating a practical intercultural learning experience is primarily tied to the language teacher’s teaching perspectives, beliefs, knowledge, skills, and, more importantly, the willingness to act and comply with the need to renovate their roles and entitled students with intercultural formation. Foreign language educators are to acknowledge that more than coping with current demands to respond effectively to an interconnected and intercultural world, language learning’s primary objective is to develop in learners their communicative ability, which is linked to the development of cultural knowledge, skills, attitudes, and awareness. Developing ICC will enable learners to successfully cope with the intercultural reality outside in the real world.

Teachers play a fundamental role in offering students the possibility of a comprehensive and holistic progression in language acquisition. To commit to this goal, teachers themselves need to be willing to put forth the work and effort to get training or self-training with an open mind and disposition to learn and acquire intercultural knowledge and skills, which would initiate the path to become intercultural mediators in the language classroom. According to McLaren (2003), educators need proper pedagogical tools to teach ICC while balancing it with language aims and comprehending how learners’ ICC can be enhanced in the local context.

This task needs to be understood as a lifelong training that guarantees a continuous and progressive development of their knowledge, skills, and attitudes, which entails educators an enriched intercultural teaching praxis while teaching a foreign language. Leutwyler et al. (2014) have observed that developing intercultural competence is not entirely linked to having a high level of intercultural sensitivity, requiring a long-term, multifaceted, and challenging process. Álvarez y González (2018) interpreted that the process of becoming interculturally competent is also influenced by the members of a community rather than being strictly an individual quality.

To approach the question of ‘what’ and ‘how’ to mediate in the language classroom, it is valid to support that language teachers can use the multiple resources, material, and reality around them to mediate intercultural



objectives. One of the many elements gathered from reality is mentioned by Porto (2019) in which she highlights the potential use of intercultural encounters through visual media to develop quality education in the foreign language classroom in higher education adjured to the development of significant capacities such as critical thinking, imaginative understanding, and world citizenship.

In this light, the literature available supports intercultural learning highlighting its benefits in different extents: personal, academic, professional, social, and humanistic. Some of the advocates who propose clear intercultural objectives in the context of education strongly emphasize how language and culture interconnect (Byram, 1997, 2021; Council of Europe, 2001; Deardorff, 2006).

When exploring the 'what' to teach about culture, Seelye (1993) proposed achievable goals, articulating language and cultural Teaching that can direct teaching practices to boost students' empathy and curiosity about another culture or one's own culture. Also, it frames the 'what' and 'why' from the student's perspective, orienting the language pedagogy as an individual realization that effective communication involves determining culturally conditioned images and patterns evoked in other peoples' minds when interacting with the world around them. The 'why' opens one's mind to better comprehend that the reasons behind peoples' actions, thinking, and behaviors result from learned cultural patterns linked to basic physical and psychological needs.

### **How can language teachers integrate and maintain the Teaching of culture and adopt the role of an intercultural mediator?**

To address this question, critical pedagogy principles contribute to building a solid theoretical basis for the needed steps to develop ICC and critical cultural awareness in the English as a foreign language classroom (Aguado, 2003; McLaren, 2003). Critical pedagogy builds from the other, understanding how relationships with others are sustained. Reflecting on the language praxis, a critical pedagogy within the learning environment stimulates analysis and inquisitive practices around content and reality that can challenge perceptions about language-culture interrelatedness. In a community of learning both actors (teacher and student) are to contribute with their own culture and identify to the active discussion and accommodation of new views, attitudes and behaviors about the elements involved in the learning process, in particular about the ICC development in language learners.

Byram (2021) has theoretically approached the construct of intercultural communicative competence first by establishing the difference between the concept of intercultural competence and ICC. He clarifies that ICC relates to the ability to effectively interact and communicate with people from another culture in which they can integrate their linguistic, sociolinguistic, and discourse competencies through a foreign language.

Byram's ICC model comprises five components: knowledge, attitudes, skills, behaviors, and critical cultural awareness (Byram, 1997, 2021). To take the model to the educational context, he proposed intercultural teaching objectives for each component. These teaching objectives can serve language educators interested in incorporating an integral foreign language teaching autonomously, situationally, and intentionally focusing on ICC learners' development. For example, one of the general knowledge objectives suggested by Byram indicates that the learner should be directed to know about social groups, products, practices, political and economic factors, national memory, conventions of communication and interaction, customs and rituals, general societal



processes, events and their emblems, and markers of national identity with the purpose of relating and reflecting on them from their own perspectives and the perspective of other culturally different individuals.

According to Byram and Feng (2005), to develop ICC in terms of knowledge, attitudes, skills, behaviors, and critical cultural awareness, an individual, is also required to develop an awareness of their own cultural identity to have a frame of reference trained to adopt, assess, and accept differences. In this light, Byram (2002) suggested that a teacher's knowledge of and exposure to other cultures is not as influential as the educator's will and ability to incite and support learners' disposition, ability, and awareness to detect misconceptions, stereotypes, and bias towards their culture and other cultures.

Language educators can use national, regional, and local context material to correlate cultural knowledge about other cultures to home identity, practices, and deep cultural aspects. Preparing students to effectively communicate with people with diverse cultural backgrounds can be done by adopting ongoing and regular incorporation of tasks. Cubero (2021) believes that "when teaching a foreign language from an intercultural perspective, students can enrich their learning process by reinforcing identity and appreciating and preserving their own culture as it has a critical functional role in the English learning process" (p.168).

These may require taking small steps into the ICC matter. The language educator can first initiate by planning active language activities where students can get the chance to discuss, explore, compare, discover, and rediscover products, practices, and perspectives of one's own culture to foreign cultures. Such objectives can be placed in motion using short texts, films, songs, poems, video clips, magazine articles, commercials, and other authentic resources.

It is through regular exposure to cultural content, knowledge, practices, and cultural incident or cases that teachers can elicit students' reflection, assessment, and analysis which also serves time to support a process to develop cognition, empathy, curiosity, and openness towards other cultures (people from English-speaking countries or people who use English as a lingua franca).

Later, other ambitious objectives can be introduced in which ICC components are interrelated and used to trigger a change in behaviors, attitudes, and critical cultural awareness. Critical cultural awareness is understood as the "ability to evaluate critically, and based on explicit criteria, perspectives, practices, and products in one's own and other cultures and countries" (Byram, 1997, p. 63). Byram and Feng (2005) affirmed that developing ICC components that are knowledge, attitude, and behaviors, one should be aware of their own cultural identity to use intercultural strategies to assimilate and deal with the influence that cultural differences have on communication in one's worldviews.

Therefore, Byram (2002) suggested that a teacher's knowledge of and exposure to other cultures are not as important as the teacher's ability to encourage students to be more observant and aware of the role that perceptions play when sharing and engaging in communicative acts. However, efforts in teacher training should be ensured to better plan and design the intercultural teaching practice. Göbel and Helmke (2010) findings indicated that teachers' intercultural experience influences the quality of their intercultural instruction. Instructors who demonstrate intercultural teaching competence are usually interested in using communication strategies that are effective and appropriate to the teaching context (Dawson et al., 2013). Similarly, Deardorff (2006)

suggested that teachers who have a clear understanding of ICC concepts can better accomplish the objectives of ICC learning.

For that reason, there is the need to reinforce the power that teachers have in renovating educational practices. Their commitment and involvement in changing traditional modes entitle them as agents of change. Mediators should be reminded of the critical role those interactive activities play in the learning process to provide more insights regarding the 'how' of intercultural language experience. Students need to be given several opportunities to use the language mirroring the real world and the possible challenges they may encounter when communicating in a foreign language.

Planning group activities based on intercultural knowledge or content out of authentic resources would provide the classroom a rich environment where learners share, connect and agree or disagree about perspectives while bringing their acquired cultural knowledge (Arkoudis et al., 2013). In these kinds of exercises, language educators as intercultural mediators should constantly monitor class interactions to recognize moments in which students may be addressing certain issues from a monocultural or ethnocentric viewpoint to intervene and carefully direct attention to view the issue from different perspectives and by encouraging students to decenter (Bennett & Bennett, 2020; Byram, 2021; Deardorff, 2009).

Designing language activities infused with intercultural content and reflective tasks facilitate the promotion of the ICC competence. According to Huang (2021) explicit teaching of intercultural issues in the language classroom supports and develops different ICC dimensions.

### **Suggestions for practical ICC learning activities**

The integration of intercultural matters should not be erratic. On the contrary, it must be approached as a core component that infiltrates the language learning process. According to Göbel and Helmke (2010), precise directions for lesson planning and preparation can help teachers design intercultural tasks. Intercultural mediators can design language tasks emphasizing comparative analysis, asking students to compare and contrast home and foreign cultures based on themes and content extracted from authentic resources, films, literature, television, video clips, or podcasts. For example, in the theme of immigration, teachers can talk about many aspects of culture, such as the ideas of gender roles, collectivistic and individualistic societies, notions of time and work, education, and diversity (Cubero, 2021).

It is also advisable to take advantage of technology. It offers varied resources that can be used to provide an intercultural context in ICC teaching efforts. For example, establishing networks with foreign institutions can mean a fruitful opportunity to expose learners to a virtual intercultural encounter. Students can interact, communicate, solve, adopt strategies, and gain experience for real-world intercultural engagement. It is important to mention that the learning activities need to be carefully designed so that the language demands to be targeted are appropriate for the students' level. These tasks can include oral discussion, simulations, and writing activities. Some of the suggested learning activities are listed below:

- ◇ Learners are given a glimpse of intercultural concepts reflected in the authentic resources used (e.g., films, stories, passages), eliciting students' reactions through oral or writing tasks. Students are exposed to and notice different aspects of their culture and those of the target cultures. Students

compare the various cultural elements by engaging in paired oral discussions using a conversational question guide. Students produce sentences based on the input resulting from the comparison and use it to write journal reactions.

- ◇ Learners are explicitly taught to learn concepts and vocabulary that would help them talk about intercultural issues.
- ◇ Students are given the space to individually reflect upon their understanding of the content portrayed in the resources and compare their own cultures to the target cultures.
- ◇ Students are provided with introspective tasks to awaken attitudes of empathy, respect, and sensitivity for otherness.
- ◇ In group activities (e.g., panel, group discussion), students are guided to appreciate the need for embracing cultural diversity and values. Students collaborate in the construction of knowledge.
- ◇ Students are given opportunities to practice simple paragraphs, state reflective ideas, and build experiences that can become the building blocks for acquiring their intercultural experience.
- ◇ Students can use cognitive tools such as graphic organizers, summaries, posts, pair assessments, creative products, and video clips.
- ◇ Students are presented with intercultural input regularly to develop their skills which can be put into practice in role-play activities or case analysis.
- ◇ Students are assessed through different instruments, formative and summative. Formative assessments such as journal writing reactions, movie reviews, and group discussions serve to identify indicators of progression in language and culture.

Intercultural teachers are invited to use authentic materials such as authentic passages, films, documentaries, documents, photographs, infographics, cartoons, and more in their Teaching. The table that follows recommends various films with Latin American cultural themes. These address concepts and realities that can be used to elicit various intercultural reflective tasks while practicing, receiving input, and giving food for thought for both teachers and learners regarding intercultural and language objectives (Goldstein, 2022).

Table 1

*Sample of films with Latin American cultural themes*

| Films  | Cultures          |
|--|-------------------|
| Harvest of Empire: The untold story of Latinos in America<br><a href="https://vimeo.com/48145023">https://vimeo.com/48145023</a>     | USA-Latin America |
| ¡Las Sandinistas!<br><a href="https://vimeo.com/ondemand/lassandinistasenglish">https://vimeo.com/ondemand/lassandinistasenglish</a> | Nicaragua         |
| Even the rain<br><a href="https://youtu.be/fDCpoyj8R6c">https://youtu.be/fDCpoyj8R6c</a>   | Latin America     |
| The book of Life<br><a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3LSph36rSXY">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3LSph36rSXY</a>            | Mexico            |
| When two worlds collide<br><a href="https://youtu.be/Qe9ZybqKOLg">https://youtu.be/Qe9ZybqKOLg</a>                                   | Perú              |
| El Pájaro de Fuego   | Costa Rica        |





<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ViH0XGdFyZ8>

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*Note.* Film Links Source: Youtube

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

After conducting this revision of constructs, arguments, and ideas proposed by ICC advocates, language educators can rest assured that integrating the intercultural component should not be viewed as a difficult task to commit to. Every teacher willing to become an intercultural language mediator can create, plan, and instruct learners on the path of developing their ICC. Latin American cultures share a heritage that can serve as a platform to study cultural aspects leading students to compare, contrast, discover and rediscover elements from different perspectives.

When studying and incorporating elements from home cultures, the recognition of other cultures becomes easier. Once individuals understand that other groups do not share their perceptions, it is easier to develop openness, empathy, and curiosity towards other culturally different groups or individuals. Language educators need to devote more efforts to fostering ICC in the foreign or second language classroom; due to this, intercultural competence does not emerge incidentally. Explicit intercultural language tasks need to be proposed and mediated in the classroom. As pointed out, sufficient research has acknowledged positive ICC outcomes to specific intercultural learning activities

On the contrary, it takes a lifelong process. Becoming intercultural mediators requires teachers to take advantage of any content material, resources, or ideas to establish intercultural connections. Step by step, from one language task to another, intercultural language mediators can build a solid intercultural mediation that may potentially lead students to shift monocultural perceptions and ethnocentric ideas. Systematic and regular introduction of learning tasks and material influences and benefits learners and teachers. It would trigger subtle changes in their teaching mediation that can potentially translate into fertile ground for teachers to gain and accumulate experience and expertise around intercultural issues. Training or self-training in intercultural issues must become essential for language teachers' professional development. The matter should no longer be considered an extra in the field to be incorporated when it becomes mandatory in the language curriculum.

Consequently, a critical aspect that can be determinant in approaching intercultural objectives is praxis reflexivity. A reflective and self-assessment routine would allow educators some room for improvement. Educators in the field of language teaching should objectively reflect upon their own practices and the role they play in helping learners achieve greater educational and formative objectives that transcend and serve purposes beyond the classroom.

This paper invites language educators to set aside traditional teaching praxis towards embracing an intercultural and holistic standpoint in their instruction. This invitation is endorsed by the very nature of the teaching profession. Educators are expected to mediate, train, and be models for the new generations of citizens that will shape future societies, a task that presents a series of challenges and opportunities. In this scenario, fostering learners' ICC entitles them to effectively interact in this culturally diverse world. Believe that intercultural dialogues can have positive effects by encouraging mutual respect, acknowledging diverse ways of living, and promoting reflections on societies.



Finally, it is important to revisit the changing scenarios that Latin American countries are experiencing. The current transformations in many levels of life are leading individuals and groups of people to engage in intercultural contacts, and territories are becoming much more diverse. Consequently, there is a need to commit to a constant reflection adopting an intercultural view of life that would influence the kind of societies desired for the future, allowing individuals to cohabit peacefully and participate in fruitful interactions where all are allowed to grow academically, professionally, and personally. Consequently, further research should be directed on measuring learners' advance in the ICC components. Empirical research can potentially serve as a guideline on how and what to include when teaching the ICC component in the Latin American context as ICC research conducted in educational settings in the context of Latin American countries is limited. It is suggested to explore ICC classroom practices and students' views around the issue to better comprehend and strengthen the foreign/second language learning experience in Latin American countries.

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