

## **CHALLENGES OF IMPLEMENTING ENGLISH MEDIUM INSTRUCTION IN HIGHER EDUCATION OF GLOBAL, ASIAN AND BANGLADESHI PERSPECTIVES: A REVIEW**

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### **ABSTRACT**

A great number of universities from non-English speaking countries have implemented English medium instruction (EMI) in conducting their tertiary teaching and learning activities. Remarkably English medium instruction (EMI) opens the international exposure to the students and the teachers to be in global academic domain but along with this, it also makes some realistic challenges of potential learning outcomes. This study has critically reviewed scholarly papers and peer reviewed journals to identify and evaluate those existing real challenges that are usually experienced and perceived by teachers and students due to English medium instruction in higher education of non-English speaking countries in Global, Asian and Bangladeshi perspectives. This study has primarily reviewed the published articles on the issues of teachers' and students' perceptions of EMI in different universities in non-English speaking countries and in Bangladesh to know the real experiences of the stakeholders and the problems that they face in different courses of different disciplines. This study evaluated some positive and negative effects of EMI and also contradictory natures in implementing EMI at the tertiary academic level. This study will help corroborating macro policy level and implementation level to help taking comprehensive policy for medium of instruction in higher education sector to minimize the challenges of achieving learning outcomes to facilitate higher education of Bangladesh.

### **Keywords:**

*English medium instruction (EMI), higher education, realities, challenges, learning outcomes*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Globalization, a 21<sup>st</sup> century phenomenon, has been considered to be a significant worldwide attribute influencing English as medium of instruction in developing countries including Bangladesh (Nur et al., 2021). In Bangladesh from the British colonial period to the present, English enjoys the status of being the most prestigious foreign language (Akter & Mitul, 2020). As a consequence, all private universities in Bangladesh have chosen English language as their de-facto medium of instruction to go along with the international trend of tertiary education (Sharkar, 2019). But the students who come to both public and private universities of Bangladesh from different areas of the country have different educational, linguistic, cultural, and economic backgrounds (Akter & Mitul, 2020) and all courses except English and religious studies in pre-university education level are offered in Bengali medium of instruction in Bengali medium schools, both public and private sectors (Rahman, 2021). Akter and Mitul (2020) in their mixed-method study in a university in Bangladesh have demonstrated that the students, who are mostly coming from Bengali medium backgrounds, get frustrated being unable to properly express their views in English. They also have observed that these students feel alienated in class for their inability to understand English lectures properly and to express themselves thoroughly in English. They have further pointed out that EMI brings difficulties not only to the students but also to the teachers (Akter & Mitul, 2020). While the students face linguistic complexities, the teachers are forced to put additional effort in preparing lectures in an EMI setting which, in turn, demands more energy in their lecture delivery. Consequently, it becomes difficult for both the teachers and the students to cope with EMI (Akter & Mitul, 2020).

Meanwhile, to meet with the increasing demand for tertiary education the Government of Bangladesh (GOB) passed the Private University act 1992. Since then, in spite of the significant

increase of universities in number and the increase of students in both public and private sectors, the standard of teaching, learning, and academic research still is a big question (Sharker & Hossain, 2019). It is high time to have a deeper investigation to have a systematic review on the experiences of teachers and students who are the main stakeholders to accomplish the real complexities of EMI implementation and learning outcomes.

## **PRESENT TRENDS OF EMI IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

English language as medium of instruction globally gained its initial momentum with the Bologna declaration of 1999 (Walkinshaw et al., 2017). After that declaration, the world experienced rapid growth of EMI with substantial conclusive evidence (Dearden & Macaro, 2016). It is now clearly noticed that over the recent twenty-five years, both regional and international EMI has achieved the status of the most important feature of language policy and planning at the macro education level (Zumor & Qasem, 2019). In the last few years, a great number of top universities from non-English speaking countries have implemented EMI in conducting their tertiary teaching and learning activities (Al Hakim, 2021).

Following this current global trend of higher education, the process of transformation of educational programmes into English medium as an alternative to the native language occurs in numerous non-English speaking countries of the world (Shimauchi, 2018). Keeping pace with the growth of globalization of tertiary education, at present all over the world universities are increasingly incorporating the English language as their medium of instruction in teaching many disciplines and in their curriculum (Yuan et al., 2020). Now in the recent modern world of academia in many non-Anglophone countries EMI is observed with prominence and significance (Galloway, 2020). So presently, many non-native Anglophone countries have seen the fast growth of EMI in the tertiary education sector (Rahman et al., 2019).

Starting its momentum in Europe, EMI has been widely incorporated in countries where English is not the native language and in Asian countries such as Bangladesh, China, Malaysia and South Korea English has been adapted to tertiary education (Rahman et al., 2019). Though Asian universities have been adapting EMI in higher education, most of the studies on EMI have been done in the European regions in their own contexts (Rahman et al., 2019). But at the same time, a contrasting scenario has also been observed along with the popular trend of EMI by Dearden & Macaro (2016) in their qualitative study based on Poland, Austria, and Italy, that EMI is on increase and get the opinion in favour of introducing, but there is a distinct lack of awareness of a need to cope with EMI and its immediate negative impacts.

This trend in higher education may pose different kinds of complexities and may make the barriers to ensuring quality education and it may create complications on the abilities of the teachers' performance and abilities of the students' learning and finally may have an impact on the learning outcomes of higher education in non-Anglophone countries like Bangladesh.

In Bangladesh, Bengali has been declared the national language since 1972 and 98% of the people speak Bengali as their native language and receive public education in Bengali. It is also supposed to be used in government administration and in the judiciary (Rahman & Kaur, 2018). But recently English has been adopted largely in private sector higher education since the early 1990s (Rahman & Kaur, 2018). It can be argued that like in other non-English speaking countries private universities have paved the way for establishing EMI in undergraduate and graduate programmes to compete with the public universities (Rahman et al., 2020). In addition, recently EMI has been emphasized in Bangladeshi tertiary education level in National Education Policy-2010 (Nur, 2021) though Bengali is officially functional as the national language and is also declared as the medium of instruction allowing English along with Bengali and Bengali is used as mainstream medium in primary, secondary and higher secondary level of schooling (Rahman et al., 2020). But now no private

universities in Bangladesh use Bengali medium instruction and they declare themselves as English medium universities on their websites (Rahman et al., 2020).

In response to the Bologna process of higher education and globalization, English as the medium of instruction is firmly established around the world as a popular academic language (Macaro, 2015). Following this recent mode in global education, Gimaraes & Kremer (2020) metaphorically stated EMI as ‘unstoppable train’. But the contrasting scenario has also been remarked by Dearden & Macaro (2016) in their qualitative study based on Poland, Austria and Italy that there is a distinct lack of awareness of EMI to cope with it and its immediate impacts. But it is not left unnoticed that this trend of installing EMI in higher education might pose some sorts of complexities and challenges to ensuring quality education and there might be the immediate consequences that influence outcomes in higher education especially for non-Anglophone countries.

## **PROBLEMS OF EMI IMPLEMENTATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

With the current trend of the global increase of EMI (Dearden & Macaro, 2016) all private universities of Bangladesh since the early 1990s (Rahman & Kaur, 2018), in spite of having Bengali as the medium of instruction in the mainstream of pre-university education (Rahman, 2020), have started adopting English as the de-facto language of instruction for a great number of students currently amounting 398737 (Sarkar et al., 2021) pursuing education in private universities under EMI provision.

Five major challenges in EMI classrooms are identified by Hung & Lan (2017) in their study conducted at a public university in the Mekong Delta in Vietnam. These are teachers’ lack of language abilities, student’s low English proficiency, issue of engaging in the class discussion, shortage of preparation time for lectures and teaching resources. Meanwhile, Gimaraes & Kremer (2020) in their study in Brazil and Belgium also address these relevant issues in the ways that linguistic challenges may occur in non-English speaking countries and also in English-speaking countries where immigrant students struggle with English medium instruction to comprehend content delivered in English language. Hasan & Ibrahim (2017) find that sometimes learners understand the usages of English from the class lectures given by the teachers and sometimes the new media channels are needed for the support for them. Similarly, Bradford (2016) gave emphasis on the lack of skilled support staff to maintain the coherence with EMI in doing academic work with diverse participants.

It is now obvious in the field of higher education that conducting teaching individual courses in tertiary education programmes in English medium instruction is considered by governments and institutions in many non-English speaking countries as useful for both national and international students (Bradford, 2016). That is why policymakers, administrators of higher education institutions, teachers, staff, and students with mother-tongue-based academic backgrounds engaged in the processes of EMI implementation have to count multiple issues including the scope of using English, instructional quality for teaching and learning and the integration of essential courses and programmes into existing institutional frameworks (Bradford, 2016).

Nevertheless, it is a matter of concern that the educational outcome is questionable due to adoption of EMI policy which threatens the development of knowledge in higher education in Asian non-Anglophone countries (Rahman et al., (2018). Moreover, Sarkar et al., (2021) in their qualitative study interviewing students and lecturers in private universities in Bangladesh have reported that EMI causes multiple challenges for such a big portion of the recipients of higher education and the content lecturers also experience difficulties in conducting the classes by thoroughly adopting EMI. Besides, Sultana (2018) in her ethnographic study on students in a private university in Bangladesh explores the context of EMI practice and the identity of learners remarking that students find themselves incompatible with internalizing and speaking in classroom discussions and activities and noticeable demoralization takes place. Sarkar et al., (2021) have reported in concluding remarks in their study

that the quality of higher education through EMI in the private universities in Bangladesh has been compromised and most importantly the nation exhibits limited success in instilling EMI in higher education. Along with this it is also informed by Sarker et al., (2021) that the perception of the stakeholders of language management level and implementation have been found absent and thus language practice has been suffering in the pedagogy. Rahman et al., (2019) also have observed the situation of higher education in their qualitative research that descriptions of everyday's experiences of the stakeholders at the micro-level have been given little or no importance.

However, Sharkar (2019) reported that there is a lack of empirical study on the experiences of the teachers and the students about English medium of instruction in higher education in Bangladesh. Akter & Mitul (2020) in their study at Bangladesh University of Professionals have identified some current specific complexities and barriers confronted by the students and the teachers in the implementation of EMI. They also identified complexities related to the cognitive ability of teachers to perform teaching. They further found complexities related to the cognitive ability of students in making notes, writing reports, responding to questions, participating in discussions or in understanding subject matters which affect negatively on academic outcomes in the tertiary education and all these issues imply that academic performance may be compromised.

## **NEGATIVE EFFECTS OF EMI IMPLEMENTATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

Zumor (2019) in Saudi Arabia, Aizawa and Rose (2019) in Japan, Hengadeekul et al., (2014) in Thailand, Rahman and Kaur (2018) and Sultana (2014) in Bangladesh, in their studies focused on micro-level education systems have found mentionable negative consequences of EMI implementation in the issues of content comprehension and assessment, classroom language use, code-switching, instructional motivation, speaking anxiety, socialization on campus and self-image. Along with those researchers cited above, Macaro et al., (2018), Macaro (2018), Macaro, Akingcioglu & Hu (2019), Lina & Murata (2016), Walkinshaw et al., (2017), Toh (2019), Pulcini & Camoagna, (2015), Splender (2016), Dimova (2020), Cao & Yuan (2020), Macaro & Han (2020), Costales (2017), Zenkova & Khamitova (2017), Dafouz & Camacho-Miñano (2016), Bradford (2016), have reported different complexities and negative consequences of implementation of EMI in higher education in their research carried out separately in different non-Anglophone countries.

Macaro & Han (2020) in their study conducted in China have reported that the EMI comes with some tensions and challenges and they assert that the teachers not having English as their first language teach the majority of academic programmes to the students who do not have English as their first language and therefore the teachers and students face the difficulties in teaching and learning through English language. Hung (2020) in his study conducted in Taiwan has got a similar result that some students and teachers may not feel initially comfortable in EMI condition which does not conform to long-standing conventions in Taiwanese classrooms. This discomfort minimizes academic optimism but the academic optimism has significant impacts on university students (Zhihao & Mustaha, 2021). So the question of the competence of teachers to teach in English medium instruction is not merely a question of their own level of English proficiency but of their pedagogical knowledge, their awareness of the linguistic challenges that also is faced by the students to communicate and ensure learning (Macaro et al., 2019).

Along with this, the low English proficiency of the students is an argument against EMI implementation (Dafouz et al., 2016). In addition to this, important evidence is noticed that in the EMI classrooms simplification, scaffolding and translanguaging exist (Dimova, 2020). Cao & Yuan (2020) have shared their personal experiences in their study on "Effective ways to meet students' cognitive and affective needs in EMI classrooms" in international business and have asserted that English medium instruction always generates challenges in teaching the pupils who have less English proficiency and a large number of students to show the frustration in participating and doing course

assignment. Insufficient English proficiency, low motivation of teachers and students, faculty members' unpreparedness for English language use, shortage of teaching materials, conservative attitudes, etc. are also considered as barriers to methodological innovation and for implementation of EMI (Zenkova & Khamitova, 2017). Similarly, all respondents identify that the instructors' low language proficiency level, the students' low language skill level, and the extra amount of workload for preparing for the class to provide quality services are responsible for the negative impact on education in EMI provision (Zenkova et al., 2017). It is also noted that simplified content is required due to students' problems learning with their low level of English language skills and it causes a decline in the quality of education (Zenkova et al., 2017). The proficiency of English of both teachers and students is identified as the main barrier that can hamper the implementation of EMI at the tertiary level (Zenkova et al., 2017).

Macaro et al., (2017) in their study on EMI in higher education have raised some questions about the consequence of EMI on content learning to identify the challenges faced by the students coming from secondary education to university academic programmes. Field level stakeholders of EMI express the existing struggles to understand the content of the subject taught to them following the western style of instruction (Galloway, 2020). Rahman & Kaur (2018) in their study of an Asian perspective have reported that the use of English in operation in tertiary educational institutions is often limited and so it causes code-switching. Besides, Zumor and Qasem (2019) have reported on the serious negative impact on specific disciplines in their survey conducted in the Middle East.

Apart from this, other challenges related to linguistics are most visible crucial experiences of teachers and students working in non-English language speaking settings including students' inability to take notes from "context reduced" (Cummins, 1983) academic texts, teachers' lack of proficiency to use proper language in their classroom and these challenges result in declining of programme quality and faculty members' loss of confidence in instructional capacities (Bradford, 2016). This review highlights studies that have mainly emphasize the implementation of EMI in micro-level education, which has negative consequences of switching instructional language from mother tongue to English in non-Anglophone countries worldwide.

## **MIXED EFFECTS OF EMI IMPLEMENTATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

Hung (2020) asserts that EMI should be encouraged at the university level to foster students' language competence, content learning and intercultural sensitivity so that teachers can have more confidence in implementing EMI. Similarly, Costales (2017) has observed in the survey conducted in University of Oviedo in Spain that in EMI provision students' overall satisfaction level is high due to the global demand of English and students are interested to be engaged in English medium instruction for international mobility. He also claims that EMI promotes the global dimensions of university students and is viewed as a positive outcome. Another study conducted in Kazakhstan by Zenkova & Khamitova (2017) in a like manner reports that teaching the subjects in English medium instruction has positive impact and it is beneficial for the career of teachers and for external academic mobility and migration to developed countries. The articles discussed above mainly have given the emphasis on macro-level education policy and on the necessity of English language and got popular positive effects of using EMI in higher education worldwide.

Apart from the articles cited in the above chapters, Hung (2020), Costales (2017), Zenkova & Khamitova (2017), Dafouz & Miñano (2016), Koksall & Tercan (2019) have obtained some mixed results in their studies on switching from mother tongue (L1) to EMI (L2) in university education in non-Anglophone countries. Some studies (Hu & Duan, 2019; Anka & Yahoo, 2017; Manan, 2019) have found contrasting result that EMI setting had no significant effects on students' learning in the classroom and have explored the effects of EMI on content learning with mixed results. However, interestingly the study conducted by Hung (2020) in Taiwan has compared academic results of EMI

and non-EMI students and it has reported no significant consequences. Tawir & Mustapha (2017) show in their study that there is no remarkable relationship between English Language performance and overall learning. But Zenkova & Khamitova (2017) have identified the possibility of content reduction through teaching in English medium instruction due to more workloads for students. In contrast, other researchers (Hu & Duan, 2019; Anka & Yahoo, 2017; Manan, 2019) have claimed that there is no difference in final outcomes in performance between EMI learners and non-EMI learners. Similarly, no mentionable difference among them is identified in the study with the business students of final grades in three subjects offered in the first year (Dafouz & Miñano 2016). On the other hand, Koksals & Tercan (2019) with the help of different references of Rahmadani (2016) in his study in Turkey have argued that most of the learners have positive perception to English medium instruction because they can improve their English proficiency, gain confidence in conversation and comprehend more text books, journal articles in English and can receive international culture. However, Koksals & Tercan (2019) again have given reference of the research of Tsui and Ngo (2017) to argue that learners are tensed about class discussion, motivation to learn and their academic result due to EMI courses. At the end, we can conclude with Galloway's (2020) opinion where he has recommended for more effective implementation of EMI and more research including longitudinal studies on the effectiveness of teaching subjects through English medium instruction.

## **CHALLENGES OF EMI IMPLEMENTATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION OF BANGLADESH**

EMI implementation in higher education sector is rising all over the world because of the market demand for English and the case of Bangladesh is not different and so consequently private institutes of higher education in Bangladesh offer academic programmes in English (Sarkar, 2019). Rahman et al., (2019) have stated that Asian universities have been optimistically adopting EMI but most research in this field has been done in European contexts. So, this trend in higher education poses different kinds of challenges and makes the barriers to ensuring quality higher education and there might be the possibility of a loss of learning outcomes which is reported in the field of science, technology, engineering, and medicine in Bangladesh (Rahman et al., 2019). Rahman et al., (2019) also have observed the situation of higher education in their qualitative research and have mentioned that there is little or no attestation and interpretation from the micro-level stakeholders such as faculty members and students.

Rahman & Kaur (2018) have provided a chart presenting EMI situation in Asian countries based on different secondary sources which indicate that in Bangladesh privately run universities have adopted English as the de-facto medium of instruction. In such a way in Bangladesh like other non-inner circle English speaking countries private universities have paved the way to counter the mother-tongue-based medium of instruction through English in undergraduate and graduate programme (Rahman, 2020). In contrast, Bengali which is the national language of Bangladesh is functional legally for official uses and in higher education and at the macro level in primary secondary, secondary and higher secondary levels of schooling (Rahman, 2020). So, all courses that accept English and religious studies are offered in Bengali at the pre-university education level in Bangladesh (Rahman, 2021). But unfortunately, no private universities offer any of the courses in Bengali medium as they desire to ensure their identification as English medium universities on their websites (Rahman, 2020). As a result of this, from 1990s onwards an enhanced and robust attitude towards English Language Education Policy (ELEP) rhetoric has been observed prominently in Bangladesh, indicating a necessity of symbiotically keeping pace with the impetus of globalization and local development motives (Nur, 2021). For instance, The National Education Policy (NEP)-2010 has promulgated the necessity of English language education by defining its aims and objectives for developing a

knowledge-oriented, skilled human resource so that students can compete in the job market, especially in the economic sector of the country and also in the global sector (Nur, 2021).

It is now obvious that private universities in Bangladesh have adopted English as a de facto medium of instruction (Sharkar, 2019). It should also be mentioned that in Bangladesh there are about 103 private higher education institutions that are operating their academic activities in English and all of them are called English-medium universities (Sharkar, 2019). However, in the past few years academic programmes have been developed in EMI without considering of how the EMI courses fit with each other and the perceptions of learners and teachers remain absent from most of the studies (Sharkar, 2019). But the practical issues are exposed in the study in the Gulf countries done by Belhiah & Eelhami (2015) where it is stated that the current EMI policy is not without disadvantages.

Akter and Mitul (2020) in their study have exposed the fact that both the teachers and the students have accepted EMI at tertiary education as a positive endeavor in this age of internationalization but they have been facing several barriers during its implementation due to students' varying levels of language competency, differences in learning style, some critical issues related to pedagogy and the scarcity of required resources. Akter and Mitul (2020) also have found that the students face linguistic barriers and the teachers are required to put extra effort in the preparation of EMI lectures and their delivery. Additionally, there is a scarcity of textbooks and other resources available in English. Akter & Mitul (2020) have further added that the greatest challenge in implementing EMI comes from the proficiency level of the students. The most drastic consequence in this regard is the degradation of the overall quality of education by means of result in engineering of high-stake national examinations. Though Bangladesh is enjoying a high pass rate in public examinations at the pre-university education level (Nur, 2021), most of the students being Bengali native speakers and having their schooling in Bengali medium, are trying to use and think only in English and that hinders the flow of their thought as Choi & Lantolf (2008), as stated in Kanakri, (2017), in their study based on the notion of inner speech hypothesis of Vygotsky (1987) examines that learners fail to express motion in L2 frequently which shows that the students cannot think about the activity in L2 frequently but in L1. They may have excellent command over their subject area, but have a lack in English speaking skills because of getting less exposure to it. Based on the above critical discussions, it is a demand of time for policymakers to address a more context-driven, rational, synchronized and holistic approach to English language education policy (Nur, 2021).

So there is a clear gap between policy and implementation of EMI in Bangladesh which needs more in-depth study and research to find out the complexities and problems to address for better implementation of EMI and for quality higher education. That is why it is now a necessity of time to investigate the compatibility and the competency of the universities that are conducting their study in English medium instruction (Rahman, et. al., 2019). In these circumstances in the higher education sector, it is now a big challenge to ensure quality higher education through EMI. While the students face linguistic difficulties, the teachers are forced to put additional effort into preparing lectures in EMI, which, in turn, demands more energy in their lecture delivery. Moreover, they are forced to compromise the EMI policy by mixing English and Bengali as students need the English lectures to be supplemented by Bengali (Akter & Mitul, 2020). The students who get admitted to private universities due to several reasons are largely coming from Bengali medium schooling backgrounds. So, the problem regarding the medium of instruction in their tertiary level of education is a burning issue. As a result, due to the lacking of organizing and expressing ideas in English properly, some students may not get their desired grades in academic results (Akter & Mitul, 2020).

## **CONCLUSION**

The crucial point is that some studies that have been reviewed in above sections have reported positive effects of EMI. The other groups of scholars have remarked negative effects. The third groups of scholars have pointed out mixed effects of EMI implementation. As the result of the different studies conducted in different countries in different perspectives following different methodologies and many-sided complexities of implementation of EMI, further studies focusing on experiences of stakeholders' proficiency of English language, challenges of implementation of EMI and variation of academic outcomes in tertiary education level seem to be necessary to feel up the gap of the knowledge in this field.

The above literature has illustrated that there are many contradictory natures found in implementing EMI at the tertiary academic level. It is likely due to insufficient attention paid to the EMI learning scenarios in which the research should take place (Hung, 2020). The reason behind this is that till now there has been a minimum number of research on the consequences of EMI teaching and learning in classroom and class practice has been largely ignored (Chen, et al., 2020). It is now obvious that in EMI setting the difficulties faced by teachers and students with speaking, writing, and reading skills can affect their teaching and learning, their research, their effectiveness in group works, and the successful completion of their dissertations. Whatever might be the standpoint about EMI in higher education, it is clear from the above study that there is a positive or negative correlation between EMI and the academic performance of teachers and students in EMI-based higher education. But the use of English as the language of academia remains uncontested (Dafouz & Miñano, 2016).

As stated in the above literature, the researches in this field are neither abundant nor conclusive. Dafouz & Miñano (2016) generally claim that second language (English in this study) learners face more difficulties in comprehending content and thus they will achieve lower scores. That is why more studies are needed to explore the experiences of the teachers who are facing problems in communication, explaining contents, maintaining work load, preparing lecture and the experiences of the students in getting clear information from books and lectures, taking notes, writing reports, responding questions, participating in groups, taking time in private study from the participants perspective due to English medium instruction.

According to Rahman et al. (2019) English medium instruction might hinder educational outcomes as the principal aim of higher education is to develop special knowledge of the subjects, not giving the emphasis on language development. But until now, Sarker et al., (2021) in their qualitative study in Bangladesh have found that the research on teachers' interpretation of performance and students' interpretation of compatibility in micro level in EMI classrooms in higher education level is limited. That is why challenges of implementing EMI in higher education in Bangladesh need further investigation (Rahman et al., 2019). To fill up this gap of studies concerning the EMI phenomenon, a further large-scale in-depth research is needed regarding the complexities of implementation of EMI in Higher education with a view to critically analyzing and synthesizing the interpretations and perceptions of challenges experienced by university faculty members and students about the implementation of EMI.

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