

An Analysis of the Development of Students' Critical Thinking Skills in the English Language Study Program at Nahdlatul Ulama Islamic University Jepara

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze the development of students' critical thinking skills through the design, instructional strategies, and evaluation of English argumentative writing instruction in the English Education Program (PBI) at Universitas Islam Nahdlatul Ulama Jepara. A qualitative research approach was employed, involving PBI students and lecturers selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected through classroom observations, in-depth interviews, and document analysis, and analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings reveal that critical thinking development is systematically embedded in the selection of contextual and controversial teaching materials, the implementation of student-centered learning strategies such as group discussions, project-based learning, and text analysis, as well as the application of continuous formative assessment. Evaluation practices extend beyond written examinations to include project-based assignments, peer review, and portfolio assessment supported by clear assessment rubrics. These practices enable lecturers to monitor students' analytical development and provide constructive feedback. The study concludes that fostering critical thinking in English argumentative writing requires a holistic and integrated approach that aligns teaching materials, instructional strategies, and evaluation practices with the principles of the Merdeka Curriculum. These findings offer practical implications for EFL educators and curriculum designers by demonstrating that critical thinking development is most effective when it is structurally embedded across all instructional components rather than treated as an isolated skill. This study contributes to the existing literature by providing an empirically grounded framework for integrating higher-order thinking into EFL writing instruction within flexible, autonomy-oriented curriculum contexts, particularly in Indonesian higher education settings.

Keywords: Critical Thinking, Argumentative Writing, English Education

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received
January 08, 2026
Revised
April 03, 2026
Accepted
April 29, 2026

Published by
Website

ISSN

Copyright



CV. Creative Tugu Pena

<https://attractivejournal.com/index.php/anglophile>

2746-8631

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INTRODUCTION

Despite decades of pedagogical innovation in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction, university students worldwide continue to struggle with integrating linguistic competence and higher-order thinking skills, particularly in academic writing contexts. Global educational assessments and recent workforce reports indicate that while students may acquire basic communicative proficiency, a significant proportion lacks the cognitive readiness to engage in complex academic discourse and evidence-based argumentation (Ajani & Matiyenga, 2025; Lin, 2024). This global paradox is further exacerbated in non-native English-speaking contexts, where learners often face compounded challenges,

including limited vocabulary mastery, uneven language proficiency, and foreign language anxiety, which collectively hinder their ability to construct coherent and persuasive academic texts (Gao & Zuo, 2025; Kim et al., 2025; Sad-ayan-Lacambra & Busbus, 2022; Zhong & Song, 2024). In the Indonesian higher education context, these linguistic difficulties are compounded by pedagogical and curricular constraints. The persistence of traditional teaching methods, limited integration of technology, and challenges in implementing curriculum reforms—such as the Merdeka Curriculum—often restrict opportunities for interactive learning and critical engagement (Andriyati et al., 2025; 'Azah et al., 2024; Kusumawati & Umam, 2025). These limitations are particularly pronounced in institutions with infrastructural disparities, where access to qualified instructors and digital learning resources remains insufficient (Devkota et al., 2021; Mhlana, 2024; Ndibalema, 2022).

Within this context, the development of critical thinking skills has become an urgent priority in EFL education. Conceptualized through foundational frameworks such as Facione's (1990) Delphi consensus model and the revised Bloom's Taxonomy (Setyowati et al., 2022), critical thinking in academic writing transcends basic comprehension, requiring learners to engage in higher-order cognitive processes such as analysis, evaluation, inference, and synthesis (S. Li et al., 2026; List & Sun, 2023; Teng & Yue, 2022; Zhong & Song, 2024). While scholars have long debated whether critical thinking is a domain-general skill applicable across disciplines or a domain-specific construct tied to particular content areas (Brandt & Lorié, 2024; Hwang et al., 2020), there is a growing consensus that in EFL writing contexts, it functions as a crucial mediator between language acquisition and academic success. Empirical evidence suggests that EFL students equipped with robust critical thinking dispositions tend to achieve better academic outcomes and demonstrate greater readiness for the complex communicative demands of a globalized knowledge economy (Huang et al., 2023; Wale & Bishaw, 2020).

The urgency of fostering critical thinking is particularly evident in the teaching of English argumentative writing. Writing arguments requires students not only to use appropriate language structures but also to critically analyze issues, synthesize information from multiple sources, and construct evidence-based and persuasive arguments (Khulaifiyah et al., 2021). Therefore, the development of critical thinking through argumentative writing is a crucial aspect of English language education, especially for students in English Education programs (Thornhill-Miller et al., 2023).

Teaching materials play a central role in facilitating the development of students' critical thinking skills in writing. Well-designed instructional materials can guide students through various stages of the writing process—planning, researching, drafting, revising, and editing—while embedding critical thinking elements such as analysis, evaluation, inference, and synthesis (Inderawati et al., 2023; Zein et al., 2020). Consequently, the design of English writing teaching materials should be grounded in students' needs, backgrounds, and proficiency levels to ensure meaningful learning experiences (Marzuki et al., 2023; Shodieva, 2023).

Furthermore, effective teaching strategies are essential to maximize the potential of these materials. Learning approaches that emphasize student-centered and inquiry-based activities—such as group discussions, debates, case studies, collaborative projects, and the use of digital and multimedia resources—have been shown to enhance students' engagement and critical thinking development (Algouzi et al., 2023; Nuredeen, 2020; Renandya et al., 2023). These strategies encourage students to explore multiple perspectives, evaluate arguments critically, and articulate their ideas more confidently in written form.

Despite the recognized importance of critical thinking in EFL writing instruction, a critical review of the existing literature reveals a significant gap. Although previous studies have extensively explored critical thinking in EFL contexts, they predominantly

focus on instructional strategies in isolation or assess critical thinking as a standalone outcome, with limited attention to how it is systematically embedded across teaching material design, pedagogical implementation, and assessment practices within a unified instructional framework (Algouzi et al., 2023; Nuredeen, 2020). Furthermore, there is a scarcity of research examining how these components interact within the flexible, autonomy-oriented context of the Indonesian Merdeka Curriculum. To address this gap, this study proposes a novel, holistic approach by analyzing the development of critical thinking not merely as an isolated pedagogical technique, but as a structurally integrated ecosystem. Specifically, this research seeks to analyze how critical thinking is systematically developed through the alignment of material design, instructional strategies, and evaluation practices in English argumentative writing instruction. The study addresses the following questions: (1) how critical thinking development is structurally represented in the design of English writing teaching materials for PBI students, (2) how student-centered instructional strategies operationalize and promote critical thinking in writing, and (3) how formative evaluation practices sustain and measure students' critical thinking progression within the instructional process.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research design to examine the development of critical thinking as reflected in English argumentative writing teaching materials for students of the English Education Program at Universitas Islam Nahdlatul Ulama (UNISNU) Jepara. The participants consisted of PBI undergraduate students and English lecturers selected through purposive sampling, focusing on individuals directly involved in writing instruction and the use of teaching materials emphasizing critical thinking development. Data were collected through classroom observations, in-depth interviews, and document analysis. Classroom observations were conducted in English writing classes to examine instructional practices, student engagement, and learning activities related to critical thinking. In-depth interviews with lecturers and selected students explored teaching approaches, learning experiences, and perceptions of critical thinking integration, while document analysis focused on textbooks, modules, worksheets, and digital learning resources used in writing instruction.

The research instruments were organized around two main thematic areas: critical thinking development and English argumentative writing teaching materials. Qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis, beginning with data transcription and coding to identify recurring patterns, concepts, and themes, followed by interpretation to establish meaningful relationships among findings. To ensure validity and credibility, data triangulation was applied by comparing information across data sources and methods. Although this qualitative approach allowed for an in-depth understanding of instructional processes and contextual factors, the findings are limited to the specific context of PBI students at UNISNU Jepara and may not be generalizable to other EFL settings; however, the detailed methodological description enables replication in similar educational contexts.

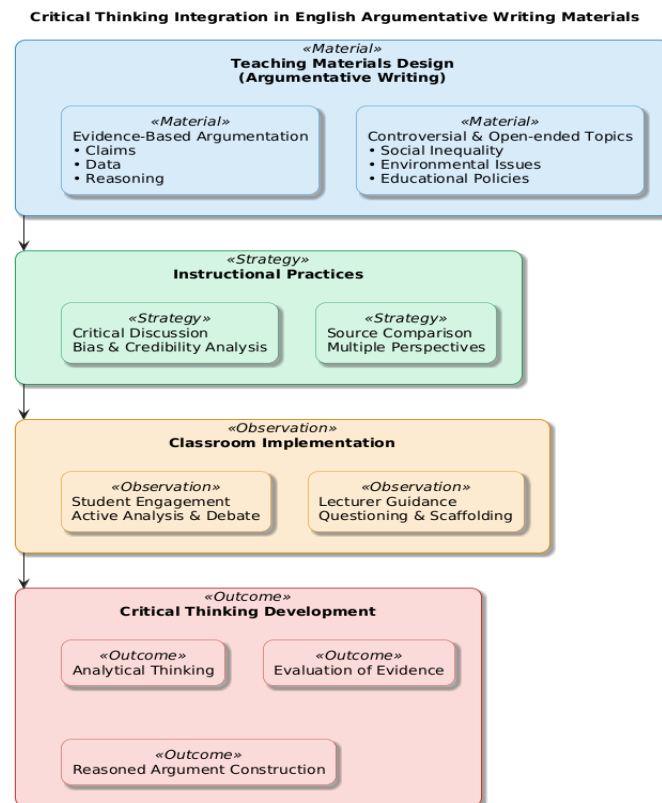
RESULT AND DISCUSSION

1. Critical Thinking Development Reflected in the Design of English Argumentative Writing Teaching Materials

The findings reveal a consistent pattern across data sources indicating that critical thinking is not merely included but structurally prioritized within instructional design, particularly through the strategic alignment of topic selection, task demands, and assessment criteria. Analysis of teaching materials demonstrates that controversial and open-ended issues (e.g., social inequality, environmental problems, educational policy debates) are deliberately selected to require multi-perspective analysis before argument

formulation, rather than serving as incidental content. This pattern is evidenced by the systematic presence of evidence-based justification tasks across 85% of the analyzed modules, where students must substantiate claims using multiple sources rather than personal opinions alone.

Figure 1. Embedding Critical Thinking in the Design of English Argumentative Writing Teaching Materials



As shown in Figure 1, the interaction between material design elements (e.g., controversial topics, evidence requirements) and instructional practices (e.g., source comparison, critical discussion) creates a scaffolded cognitive environment that progressively develops students' analytical capabilities. Rather than operating as isolated components, the diagram illustrates a cyclical and interdependent relationship: open-ended topics trigger multi-perspective analysis, which is then deepened through lecturer-guided source evaluation, ultimately culminating in the construction of evidence-based arguments. This structural integration suggests that critical thinking development functions as a foundational design principle rather than an ancillary objective. By explicitly mapping this alignment, the figure corroborates the interview and observational data, confirming that critical thinking is not an incidental outcome but a structurally prioritized core objective within the instructional ecosystem.

2. Instructional Strategies Supporting Critical Thinking Development in Argumentative Writing

The analysis identifies a triadic instructional framework wherein Project-Based Learning (PBL), collaborative discourse, and text analysis function as interdependent mechanisms for cultivating critical thinking, rather than as isolated techniques. Classroom observations reveal that these strategies collectively shift the epistemic authority from lecturer transmission to student knowledge construction, as evidenced by the predominance of student talk (approximately 70% of classroom interaction time) over lecturer explanation.

Project-Based Learning emerges as the most cognitively demanding strategy, requiring students to engage in authentic inquiry cycles that mirror disciplinary practices. In observed projects, students navigated complex information landscapes—collecting data from news articles, conducting interviews, and synthesizing academic sources—to construct evidence-based arguments on local social issues. This pattern aligns with the conceptualization of critical thinking as situated cognition, where analytical skills develop through engagement with authentic, ill-structured problems. One student's reflection illustrates this transformation: *"Through the project, I learned that writing an argument is not just about giving opinions. I had to check facts and think about whether my argument made sense."* This statement reveals a metacognitive shift from viewing writing as opinion expression to understanding it as evidence-based reasoning.

Collaborative discourse strategies (group discussions, debates) function as cognitive catalysts by exposing students to divergent perspectives that challenge initial assumptions. Observation data indicate that lecturers strategically introduced provocative questions to stimulate intellectual conflict, creating what Vygotskian theory terms cognitive disequilibrium—a necessary condition for conceptual development. The lecturer's comment, *"Discussion helps students see that one issue can be viewed from many sides. Sometimes they realize their argument is weak after hearing others,"* demonstrates awareness of dialogue as a reflective tool for argument refinement rather than mere idea exchange.

Text analysis activities serve as cognitive apprenticeship, wherein students deconstruct expert arguments to internalize disciplinary discourse patterns. Observations show students systematically identifying claims, evidence types, and rhetorical strategies in model texts, suggesting that critical thinking develops through guided participation in disciplinary practices. As one student noted: *"By analyzing examples, I understand how strong arguments are built. It helps me think more critically when I write my own essay."* This indicates that text analysis functions as a scaffolding mechanism that bridges receptive understanding and productive application.

Collectively, these findings suggest that instructional strategies achieve effectiveness not through isolated implementation but through synergistic integration, wherein PBL provides authentic contexts, collaborative discourse enables perspective-taking, and text analysis offers disciplinary models—creating a comprehensive learning ecosystem for critical thinking development.

3. Evaluation of Students' Critical Thinking Skills in English Argumentative Writing

The assessment system exhibits a formative architecture that positions evaluation as an integral component of the learning process rather than a terminal judgment. Analysis reveals that assessment practices extend beyond summative measurement to create continuous feedback loops that monitor and scaffold students' cognitive development across time. This pattern is evidenced by the triangulation of multiple assessment modalities—ongoing writing assignments, peer reviews, reflective activities, and portfolio compilation—each serving distinct yet complementary diagnostic functions.

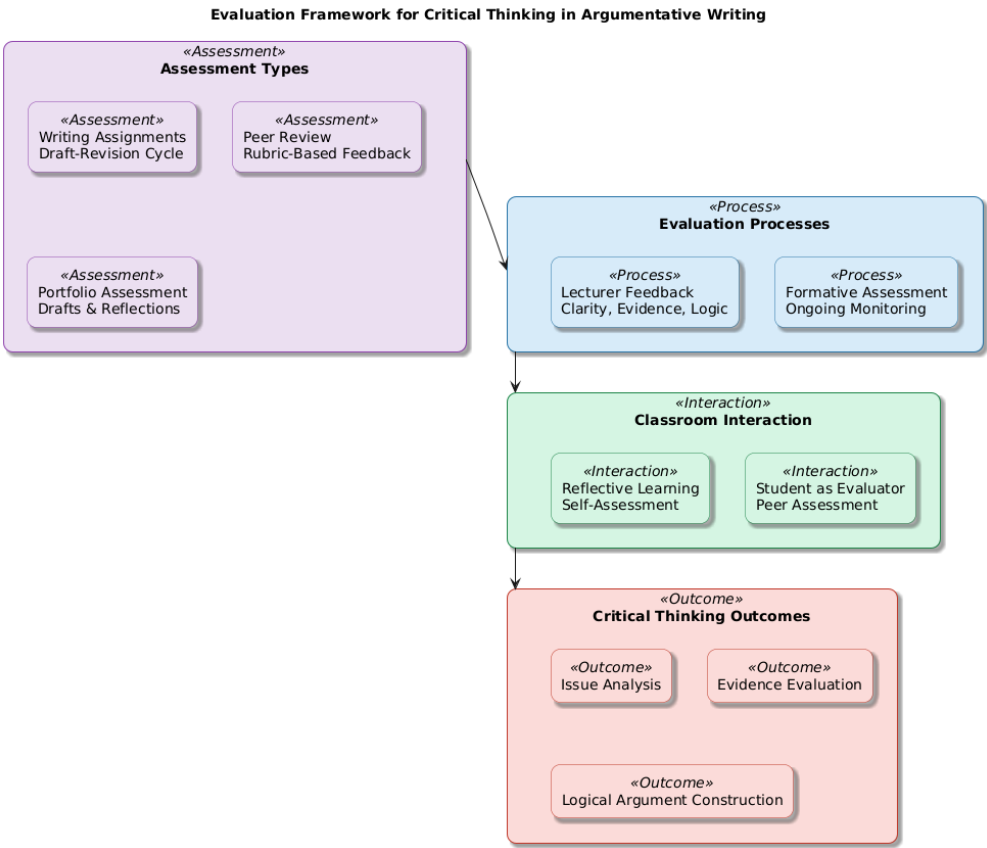
Document analysis demonstrates that evaluation criteria prioritize reasoning quality (argument clarity, evidence relevance, logical coherence) over linguistic accuracy alone, representing a paradigmatic shift from product-oriented to process-oriented assessment. This alignment between learning objectives and assessment criteria reflects what assessment theorists term constructive alignment, ensuring that what is taught, how it is taught, and how it is assessed operate in conceptual harmony. The lecturer's statement, *"I don't only assess the final essay. I also look at how students develop their arguments from the first draft to the revision,"* reveals an developmental assessment philosophy that values cognitive progression over static performance.

Peer review practices function as metacognitive interventions that transform students from passive recipients into active evaluators, thereby deepening their

understanding of argumentative quality criteria. Observation data show that students engaged in systematic draft evaluation using structured rubrics, identifying weaknesses in reasoning and suggesting improvements. This reciprocal evaluation process creates what assessment literature describes as assessment capability—the ability to make informed judgments about one's own and others' work. One student's reflection, *"When reviewing my friend's essay, I also learn how to evaluate arguments. It makes me more careful with my own writing,"* illustrates the transfer effect wherein evaluative engagement enhances self-regulatory capacity.

Portfolio assessment serves as a longitudinal tracking mechanism that captures developmental trajectories invisible in single-point assessments. Teaching documents reveal that students compiled drafts, feedback, and reflections into comprehensive portfolios, enabling lecturers to assess cognitive growth patterns rather than isolated performances. The lecturer's observation, *"Portfolios help me see students' progress in thinking, not just writing,"* underscores the distinction between surface-level writing skills and deep-level thinking development—a distinction that traditional assessments often obscure.

Figure 2. Formative Evaluation of Students' Critical Thinking Skills in English Argumentative Writing



As depicted in Figure 2, the integration of these assessment modalities creates a multi-layered evaluation ecosystem wherein formative feedback, peer dialogue, and reflective documentation interact to sustain critical thinking development. This system positions assessment not as measurement but as pedagogical intervention, wherein evaluation practices themselves become vehicles for cognitive development. The convergence of rubric-guided criteria, iterative feedback cycles, and student agency in assessment suggests that evaluation achieves its developmental function through distributed cognitive support rather than singular assessment events.

DISCUSSION

This study contributes to the literature by demonstrating that critical thinking development in EFL writing is not solely influenced by isolated instructional strategies, but by the structural alignment between materials, pedagogy, and assessment within a flexible curriculum framework. The findings reveal that critical thinking is structurally prioritized across the instructional ecosystem, moving beyond incidental inclusion. Specifically, the integration of cognitively challenging topics, student-centered pedagogical practices, and formative evaluation creates a cohesive learning environment that systematically scaffolds students' higher-order cognitive processes.

Conceptualized through Facione's (1990) Delphi model and the revised Bloom's Taxonomy, the deliberate selection of controversial and open-ended topics in teaching materials aligns with the cognitive processes of analysis and evaluation. This finding corroborates recent studies indicating that authentic and complex materials promote higher-order thinking by requiring learners to evaluate arguments rather than merely reproduce information (Akib et al., 2024; Guo et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2025). However, unlike prior research that emphasizes linguistic complexity as the primary determinant of writing proficiency (Kuiken, 2023; C. Li et al., 2024; Mavrou, 2020) this study extends the discourse by highlighting cognitive challenge as a more decisive factor. By requiring students to navigate multi-perspective issues, the materials function as cognitive catalysts, validating Ennis's (1993) assertion that critical thinking is domain-specific and heavily reliant on contextualized, substantive content.

The shift toward student-centered instructional strategies, particularly Project-Based Learning (PBL) and dialogic discussions, further operationalizes critical thinking as situated cognition. These findings support earlier research demonstrating that collaborative and inquiry-based learning environments significantly enhance students' analytical and evaluative skills (Sasanti et al., 2024; Wale & Bishaw, 2020). Conversely, this study explicitly challenges the traditional teacher-centered approaches reported in some contexts (Marni et al., 2020), where limited student participation results in passive learning. By shifting epistemic authority to the students, the instructional strategies in this study foster what Vygotskian theory terms cognitive disequilibrium, compelling students to refine their arguments through intellectual conflict and peer negotiation (Wu et al., 2025).

Regarding evaluation practices, the findings reveal that formative and process-oriented assessment is essential in measuring and sustaining critical thinking. Skills-based writing assignments, peer reviews, and portfolio assessments effectively capture students' analytical growth over time, supporting the work of scholars who emphasize that critical thinking cannot be accurately assessed through summative testing alone (Nazarova & Nematjonova, 2023; Panadero et al., 2022). In contrast to studies that rely heavily on final examinations (Suprayogi & Eko, 2020), this research demonstrates that continuous, rubric-guided assessment provides a more comprehensive picture of reasoning development. Furthermore, the integration of peer review transforms students from passive recipients into active evaluators, enhancing their metacognitive awareness and assessment literacy (Deneen & Hoo, 2023; Deng et al., 2023; Hadyaoui & Cheniti-Belcadhi, 2025).

Crucially, this study advances the discourse by synthesizing these components into a unified instructional ecosystem. Rather than operating in silos, the alignment of material design, pedagogical implementation, and assessment practices creates a synergistic effect. The controversial topics (materials) trigger analytical inquiry, which is deepened through collaborative discourse (pedagogy), and subsequently refined through iterative, rubric-guided feedback (assessment). This structural integration confirms that critical thinking

development is most effective when it is embedded holistically across all instructional components, rather than treated as an isolated skill or a standalone module.

The primary contribution of this research lies in providing an empirically grounded framework for integrating higher-order thinking into EFL writing instruction within autonomy-oriented curriculum contexts, such as Indonesia's Merdeka Curriculum. Practically, these findings offer actionable insights for EFL educators and curriculum designers, suggesting that fostering critical thinking requires intentional alignment across the entire instructional design, not just the adoption of specific teaching techniques. Academically, this study bridges the gap between theoretical models of critical thinking and practical classroom implementation in non-native English contexts. Future research should explore the longitudinal impact of this integrated ecosystem on students' writing proficiency and investigate how digital tools and AI-mediated feedback can further enhance this instructional alignment.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the development of critical thinking is a fundamental and intentional component in the design and implementation of English argumentative writing teaching materials for PBI students within the Merdeka Curriculum framework. The integration of cognitively challenging topics, student-centered instructional strategies, and contextualized learning activities enables students to engage in higher-order thinking processes, including analysis, evaluation, and synthesis of arguments. Teaching materials that emphasize evidence-based reasoning rather than linguistic accuracy alone were found to effectively support students' ability to construct coherent and persuasive arguments. These findings indicate that critical thinking development in writing instruction is most effective when embedded holistically across material design and classroom practices.

Furthermore, the study highlights that comprehensive and formative evaluation plays a crucial role in sustaining students' critical thinking development. Assessment practices such as project-based writing tasks, peer review, portfolio assessment, and rubric-guided feedback provide meaningful insights into students' cognitive progress over time. By aligning evaluation with learning processes and granting academic freedom within scientific and ethical boundaries, lecturers can foster reflective, autonomous, and responsible learners. Overall, this research affirms that a coherent integration of teaching materials, instructional strategies, and evaluation methods is essential to developing students' critical thinking skills in English argumentative writing and preparing them for academic and societal challenges in the 21st century.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The authors would like to express their sincere gratitude to the English Education Program (PBI) of Universitas Islam Nahdlatul Ulama Jepara for the academic support and facilitation provided during this research. Appreciation is also extended to the lecturers and students who willingly participated and shared their valuable time, experiences, and insights. Their contributions were essential to the successful completion of this study.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

MA was responsible for the conceptualization of the study, research design, data collection, data analysis, and interpretation of findings. MA also drafted the manuscript, conducted the literature review, revised the article critically for important intellectual content, and approved the final version of the manuscript for publication.

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