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THE ROLE OF TEACHERS' COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS IN DEVELOPING CRITICAL THINKING AMONG SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS: AN ANALYTICAL STUDY

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Abstract

This study examines how secondary teachers' comprehension questions are related to students' critical thinking. Using a descriptive-analytical design, we observed lessons, analysed teachers' preparation books, and administered questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. A corpus of 137 classroom questions was coded according to Bloom's cognitive levels. Lower-order questions (remembering, understanding) accounted for 66% of all prompts, whereas higher-order questions (analysis, evaluation, creation) represented 20%. The interviews indicated that time constraints, curriculum coverage pressures, and limited training in question design were key barriers to higher-order questioning. Although the students reported greater motivation when they were asked open -ended questions, fewer than half felt free to respond to them. The findings suggest an association between question quality and opportunities for critical thinking, highlighting the need for targeted teacher professional development and assessment practices that value analytical responses. The implications and limitations related to sampling, coding reliability, and generalizability are discussed.

Keywords: comprehension questions, critical thinking, teacher, secondary education, classroom questions, thinking skills, content analysis, Bloom's taxonomy, pedagogical practices, active learning.

Introduction

The educational process at all levels constitutes a fundamental pillar in shaping individuals and refining their intellectual and academic identities. Secondary education holds particular significance, as it represents the transitional stage between basic education and higher education, during which students' critical and analytical faculties begin to take shape. In this context, the teacher is regarded as a central figure in guiding learners, not only as a transmitter of knowledge and information but also as a motivator who encourages critical inquiry, stimulates questioning, and cultivates analytical and evaluative thinking.

Among the pedagogical tools employed by teachers are classroom questions, which serve as a vital bridge of communication between the teacher and students, as well as an effective means of assessing comprehension of the lessons. These questions are not limited to testing memorisation and recall; instead, they can become a key entry point for fostering higher-order thinking skills, particularly critical thinking. Critical thinking is defined as a cognitive ability that enables students to discern between opinions and arguments and to adopt positions grounded in analysis and reasoning rather than rote learning and conformity.

Classroom questions, particularly comprehension questions posed after the presentation of instructional content, represent an essential mechanism for enhancing classroom interaction. They allow teachers to evaluate students' understanding of knowledge and to identify gaps in the learning process. However, their pedagogical value extends beyond this traditional role, becoming a strategic tool for guiding critical thinking, provided that they are formulated effectively and delivered in a manner that stimulates students' engagement in analysis and discussion.

The central research problem of this study can be formulated as follows:

What role do comprehension questions posed by teachers play in fostering critical thinking among secondary school students?

From this problem, the following research questions emerge:

1. What is the nature of the questions posed by teachers at the secondary level?

2. What is the relationship between the types of classroom questions and levels of critical thinking?

3. How can well-constructed questions contribute to the development of students' critical and analytical abilities?

To address these questions, this study is based on the following key hypotheses:

- The quality of classroom questions has a direct effect on the development of critical thinking.
- Declarative (direct) questions contribute far less to the cultivation of critical thinking than do open-ended questions, which demand analysis, comparison, and evaluation.
- Teachers' awareness of the importance of questions in stimulating critical thinking is a decisive factor in their practical use.

This research adopts a descriptive–analytical approach, which involves collecting data on the nature of classroom questions and analysing them according to scientific criteria that link question types to levels of critical thinking.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this study constitutes a foundational basis for understanding the core concepts underlying the research topic, particularly comprehension questions employed by teachers in the classroom and the critical thinking skills that are intended to be developed among secondary school learners. The relationship between classroom questions and critical thinking is neither spontaneous nor incidental; rather, it is grounded in precise pedagogical and methodological principles. This chapter, therefore, seeks to clarify the following concepts: classroom questions (definition, types, and functions) and critical thinking (definition, characteristics, and core skills).

Comprehension Questions in Classroom Practices

Definitions of Classroom Questions

Classroom questions are among the most prominent pedagogical tools used by teachers to engage with students during lessons. They refer to oral or written queries posed by the teacher throughout the instructional session to assess students' understanding of the lesson, guiding

them towards deeper thinking, or encouraging active participation. Educational theorists define them as "a structured verbal behaviour designed to elicit cognitive or intellectual responses from learners, to enhance or evaluate learning" (Al-Shukri, 2018, p. 91).

The Concept of Comprehension Questions

Comprehension questions are a type of questioning that focuses on the learner's understanding of information or phenomena. They move beyond the simple mechanical recall of knowledge and require the ability to explain ideas, reformulate them, and connect them to other contexts. In the hierarchy of educational objectives, comprehension questions occupy a middle level: they rank above “remembering” but precede “applying, analysing, and evaluating.”

Classification of Classroom Questions

Educational classifications of classroom questions vary, but Bloom's taxonomy of cognitive objectives is one of the most widely used tools for analysing teachers' performance in terms of questioning quality. According to this taxonomy, questions can be categorised as follows:

- **Remembering questions:** Retrieval of information.
- **Comprehension questions:** Explanation, interpretation, and reformulation.
- **Application questions:** Use of concepts in new contexts.
- **Analysis questions:** Breaking down information and distinguishing causes and effects.
- **Evaluation questions:** Judging the value of ideas or opinions.
- **Creation questions:** Generate new ideas or solutions.

The comprehension questions fall within the second level but serve as a starting point for the development of higher-order skills. Their careful formulation allows them to be extended into analysis and critical thinking (Abd al-Latif, 2019, p. 37).

Functions of Classroom Questions

The primary functions of classroom questions can be summarised as follows:

- Assessing students’ understanding of the content.

- Enhancing classroom interaction and participation.
- Through stimulating thought and encouraging students to express their opinions.
- Promoting concentration and attentiveness.
- Connecting prior knowledge with newly acquired concepts.

Characteristics of an Effective Question

For a question to fulfil its pedagogical purpose effectively, it must be clear, precise, and as open-ended as possible. It should also correspond to the students' cognitive and linguistic levels and be posed in an engaging manner that stimulates interaction rather than instilling fear or confusion.

Critical Thinking and Its Importance in Secondary Education

Critical thinking has emerged as one of the most essential intellectual skills that modern educational systems aim to cultivate, given its crucial role in fostering learner autonomy, enhancing awareness, and promoting intellectual independence. Scholars have offered numerous definitions of this concept from educational and philosophical perspectives. Ennis (1985) defined critical thinking as "the ability to think logically and reflectively for the purpose of forming a judgment or making a decision," whereas Halpern (1999) described it as "a purposeful type of thinking that employs analytical and logical skills to evaluate arguments and information." Similarly, Paul and Elder (2001) characterised it as "a self-directed and evaluative process that guides the mind to analyse and assess information rationally in order to make responsible intellectual decisions" (p. 76), and Brookfield (2012) viewed it as "the habitual use of a set of analytical skills to examine and interpret the beliefs and opinions we hold or encounter." From an Arabic scholarly perspective, Abu al-Sheikh (2017) defined critical thinking as "a mental activity undertaken by an individual to analyse ideas, beliefs, and arguments with the aim of evaluating them and forming a judgment based on logical criteria" (p. 29). In a similar vein, Nasif (2005) emphasised that critical thinking "goes beyond merely recalling information to contemplating and analysing it, enabling one to judge its validity, value, and coherence with other knowledge" (p. 44), whereas Qroumi (2020) highlighted its "precision and objectivity," asserting that it is based on "scientific reasoning rather than emotion or conformity" (p. 63). Lambert (2014) further defined it as "the ability to engage with open-ended problems and to analyse situations rationally, requiring interpretation, evaluation, and inference" (p. 39). Collectively, these definitions underscore critical thinking as a deliberate, reflective cognitive process grounded in logic and analysis that is central to

learners' intellectual development and essential for navigating complex academic and real-world contexts.

Analytical notes

From these diverse definitions, the following shared elements can be identified:

- Critical thinking is reflective and deliberate rather than hasty.
- It relies on higher-order cognitive skills, including analysis, evaluation, inference, and comparison.
- Its primary aim is to reach logical and reasonable judgments.
- It is based on intellectual standards such as objectivity, coherence, depth, and precision.
- It serves as a tool for examining beliefs, opinions, and ideas rather than simply reproducing information.

These characteristics make critical thinking a vital requirement in secondary education, as it enables learners to move beyond rote memorisation and mechanical repetition, fostering an independent intellectual stance built on analysis rather than imitation.

2. Components of Critical Thinking

According to numerous educational studies, critical thinking consists of several core skills, including the following:

- **Analysis:** Breaking down ideas into their fundamental elements.
- **Interpretation:** Explaining implicit or underlying meanings.
- **Evaluation:** Assessing the validity or strength of an idea.
- **Reasoning:** Concluding from logical premises.
- **Inference:** Arriving at new ideas on the basis of evidence (Faleh, 2020; Alawi, 2019).

3. Characteristics of a critical thinker

A critical thinker is distinguished by several attributes, such as:

- The ability to engage in constructive scepticism and independent thought.
- Avoidance of bias and openness to alternative viewpoints.

- A desire for knowledge and a refusal to accept assumptions uncritically.
- Respect for evidence and proof.
- A tendency to analyse and interpret rather than blindly memorise.

4. The Importance of Critical Thinking in Secondary Education

Secondary education is a decisive stage in a learner's life, during which cognitive abilities shift from simplicity to abstraction and from passive reception to active analysis and interpretation. At this stage, the importance of fostering critical thinking becomes evident, as it provides learners with the essential skills needed for their future academic and professional paths, including problem-solving, decision-making, and an understanding of contemporary social and political issues.

5. Relationship between Classroom Questions and Critical Thinking

The link between these two concepts is evident in the fact that questions, especially open-ended ones, are among the most significant stimuli for critical thinking. When a teacher poses a question that requires interpretation, evaluation, or comparison, students are naturally encouraged to activate higher-order cognitive skills, which enhances their analytical and evaluative capacities. The deeper the questions are, the greater the opportunities for learners to develop critical thought (Ahmad, 2018; Salhi, 2022).

Methodology

Research design and context.

This study adopted a descriptive–analytical mixed-methods design to examine the nature of teachers' comprehension questions and their relationship with the development of students' critical thinking. Data collection took place in three public secondary schools in Blida Province, Algeria, with a focus on final-year classes in both literary and scientific streams.

Participants.

The sample comprised twelve secondary school teachers of Arabic, history, and philosophy and four final-year classes. Teacher selection was based on availability and willingness to participate, ensuring the representation of multiple disciplines. Seventy-eight students (at the third-year level) also participated in a questionnaire survey.

Data collection instruments.

Four instruments were employed:

1. **Classroom observations** – Nonparticipant observations were conducted across multiple lessons to document questioning practices.
2. **Content analysis of preparation books** – Teachers' lesson preparation books were analysed to capture planned questions.
3. **Student questionnaire** – A ten-item instrument was used to assess students' perceptions of question types, engagement, and motivation.
4. **Semistructured teacher interviews** – Interviews with six teachers explored their approaches to questioning and perceived challenges.

Coding framework.

All the collected questions (n = 137) were classified via the revised **Bloom's taxonomy** of cognitive levels: remember, understand, apply, analyse, evaluate, and create. Coding rules were developed to ensure consistency; multipart or ambiguous questions were coded according to the highest level of cognitive demand explicitly stated.

Procedure and reliability.

Two trained coders independently classified all the questions after a calibration phase. Coding disagreements were discussed until consensus was achieved, and intercoder reliability was assessed via Cohen's κ. Classroom observations were supported by field notes and lesson recordings to verify accuracy.

Data analysis.

Descriptive statistics (counts, percentages) were calculated for the distribution of question types. The questionnaire responses were summarised via frequency analysis, and the qualitative data from the interviews and the open-ended questionnaire items were analysed thematically. The triangulation of quantitative and qualitative evidence enabled a richer interpretation of questioning practices and their potential influence on students' critical thinking development.

Results

A total of 137 teacher-selected questions were collected and categorised via revised Bloom's taxonomy. As shown in Table 1, remembering (35%, n = 48) and understanding (31%, n = 42) questions dominated, accounting for 66% of all prompts. Application-level questions made up 14% (n = 19), whereas higher-order question analysis (12%, n = 16), evaluation (6%, n = 8), and creation (2%, n = 4) collectively represented only 20%**.**

Table 1

Distribution of classroom questions by cognitive level (Bloom's taxonomy)

Cognitive Level	n	%
Remembering (knowledge recall)	48	35
Understanding (explanation, restatement)	42	31
Application (use of knowledge)	19	14
Analysis (comparison, interpretation)	16	12
Evaluation (judgement, justification)	8	6
Creation (suggesting solutions)	4	2
Total	137	100

Note. The percentages are rounded to whole numbers.

Examples of lower-order prompts included *"What is the definition of freedom?"* (philosophy) and *"Explain the following phrase…"* (Arabic). Higher-order questions, such as *"What is your opinion of the poet's stance? Was it justified?"*, were rare.

Student surveys supported these findings:

- **Eighty-two percent** reported that most classroom questions emphasised memorisation and comprehension.
- **Sixty-seven percent** felt motivated by analytical or evaluative prompts.
- Forty-nine percent of the participants were confident in their ability to answer open-ended questions.

The teacher interviews (n = 6) revealed time constraints, curriculum overload, and a lack of training in designing critical-thinking questions as key barriers. The evidence from lesson plans, observations, and interviews converged on a consistent conclusion: secondary classrooms heavily emphasise recall, offering limited opportunities for critical engagement.

Triangulation of Findings

Evidence from lesson observations, lesson plans, student questionnaires, and teacher interviews converged in a consistent pattern: questioning practices in the studied secondary classrooms remains heavily weighted towards factual recall, with few opportunities for students to demonstrate analysis, evaluation, or creativity. This imbalance reflects both systemic constraints (curricular structure, assessment pressures) and teachers' professional preparation, highlighting the need for targeted interventions to promote critical-thinking development.

Discussion

Interpretation of Findings

This study demonstrates a pronounced imbalance in the cognitive levels of teacher-posed questions in Algerian secondary school classrooms. The data revealed that two-thirds (66%) of the observed questions were limited to remembering and understanding, indicating a strong emphasis on factual recall and surface comprehension. Higher-order questions (analysis, evaluation, creation) accounted for only 20%, with application questions contributing a further 14%. Such distributions suggest that critical-thinking opportunities are structurally limited within classroom discourse and that most teacher–student interactions remain teacher centred, privileging rote learning over analytical engagement.

Interestingly, despite this questioning pattern, both the student questionnaires and the teacher interviews highlighted untapped potential for critical-thinking development. While most students expressed motivation when asked analytical or evaluative questions (67%), fewer than half (49%) reported feeling free to answer open-ended prompts. This gap between student readiness and classroom practice signals a cultural and pedagogical context in which assessment pressures, curriculum coverage, and classroom norms hinder risk-taking and deep reasoning.

Connections to Existing Literature

These findings align closely with earlier studies in similar contexts. Belkacem (2021) documented a similar overreliance on low-level questioning in Algerian classrooms, noting that evaluation and creative prompts were almost absent. Brookfield (2012) and Paul and Elder (2001) argue that purposeful questioning is one of the most effective strategies for cultivating critical thinking. However, the present study shows that this potential is not systematically leveraged. International research (Halpern, 1999; Facione, 1990) has long underscored that critical-thinking development is inseparable from teacher preparation and assessment practices, both of which appear to constrain questioning strategies in this context.

Moreover, the data highlight the tension between curriculum demands and pedagogical innovation. Teachers reported that curriculum overload and time constraints discouraged them from integrating questions that require extended discussion or justification. Similar findings have been reported in other exam-driven systems, where high-stakes testing incentivises accuracy over analytical reasoning (Brookfield, 2012).

Barriers Identified

The analysis of the interviews and observations revealed three systemic challenges:

1. **Time limitations:** Teachers often avoid open-ended questioning to stay on schedule.
2. **Curriculum density:** A focus on covering all prescribed content restricted opportunities for reflective discussion.
3. **Lack of teacher training:** Most participants reported minimal professional development in question design aligned with Bloom's taxonomy or critical-thinking pedagogy.

Together, these barriers help explain why evaluative and creative prompts were rare, despite student interest.

Limitations of the Study

This study's conclusions must be interpreted with caution. Data were collected from three schools in a single province and focused only on literary subjects, which may limit generalizability. The observation process could have influenced teacher behaviour (Hawthorne effect). Coding decisions, although guided by a rigorous framework, involve a degree of

researcher judgment. Finally, this study did not directly measure student gains in critical-thinking ability; instead, it focused on opportunities for development through questioning.

Implications for Practice and Policy

Despite these limitations, the study provides valuable insights for policymakers, school leaders, and teacher educators:

- **Teacher training:** Professional development programmes should explicitly teach strategies for scaffolding higher-order questions. Question ladders, Socratic techniques, and "wait time" strategies can help teachers feel confident in the need for analytical prompts.
- **Curriculum Reform:** Ministries and curriculum designers should allocate space within lessons for discussion-based learning, reducing excessive content coverage that hinders deep questioning.
- **Assessment Alignment:** Exams and internal assessments should reward reasoning, justification, and argumentation to signal the value of critical thinking.
- **Classroom Culture:** Teachers should create psychologically safe classrooms where students feel comfortable sharing opinions and challenging ideas. This could involve structured protocols such as "think-pair-share" and debate formats to normalise critical dialogue.
- **Resource development:** Question banks and lesson plan templates aligned with Bloom's taxonomy could serve as practical tools for teachers.

Future Research

Future studies should extend beyond literary subjects and include STEM classrooms to examine whether questioning patterns differ by discipline. Longitudinal or quasiexperimental research could investigate whether professional development in higher-order questioning produces measurable gains in students' critical-thinking performance. Moreover, classroom ethnographies could explore how cultural expectations and teacher–student relationships shape questioning behaviour, helping educators design contextually sensitive interventions.

Conclusion

This study examined the relationship between teachers' comprehension questions and the promotion of critical thinking in Algerian secondary classrooms. The findings reveal a strong

predominance of lower-order questioning, with two-thirds of prompts targeting recall and surface-level comprehension, whereas higher-order questions requiring analysis, evaluation, or creativity remain scarce. Despite this imbalance, student responses suggest a clear interest in engaging with analytical and evaluative prompts, and teacher interviews highlight systemic barriers such as time constraints, curriculum overload, and limited professional training that restrict their use.

These results underscore the need for intentional question design as a practical, cost-effective lever for fostering critical thinking. Addressing these challenges requires teacher training focused on higher-order questioning techniques, curriculum adjustments to allow discussion time, and assessment reforms that reward reasoning and argumentation rather than rote memorisation. Future research should broaden the scope to multiple regions and disciplines, incorporate direct measures of student critical-thinking growth, and evaluate the impact of professional development interventions.

By elevating questioning practices from routine fact-checking to deliberate, inquiry-driven strategies, schools can create classrooms that encourage analysis, reflection, and intellectual independence, equipping students with essential skills for higher education and lifelong learning.

Analytical observation

- Questions assessing remembering and comprehension represent **66%** of the total, focusing primarily on direct recall of information or simple explanations of lesson content or texts.
- Questions requiring analytical or critical skills constitute less than **20%**, indicating that the predominant questioning style is **declarative rather than inferential**.

1.3. Examples of Questions

In a philosophy lesson, *"What is the definition of freedom?"* → a question at the **remembering** level.

In an Arabic language lesson, *"Explain the following phrase…"* → a question at the **understanding** level.

Conversely, questions such as *"What is your opinion of the poet's stance on the issue? Do you think he was justified?"* represent the **evaluation** level and are rare.

This aligns with the findings of Abu al-Nasr (2021) and Ahmad (2018), both of whom emphasised that most teachers tend to use direct, straightforward questions that facilitate immediate assessment but do not encourage learners to reason, infer, or articulate critical viewpoints.

Section Two: The Impact of Comprehension Questions on Developing Critical Thinking

2.1. Analysis of Students' Responses

An analysis of students' interactions with various types of questions revealed the following:

- Declarative questions generally lead to brief, standardised, and sometimes mechanical responses.
- Open-ended questions (although infrequent) result in diverse viewpoints and prompt students to justify and defend their opinions.
- A positive correlation exists between the variety of questions and the diversity of student responses, as confirmed by an analysis of classroom recordings.

2.2. Teacher Interviews

In semistructured interviews conducted with six teachers, the following findings emerged:

- Some teachers acknowledged that the limited duration of lessons forces them to focus primarily on declarative questions.
- Others admitted that they lacked sufficient training in formulating critical-thinking-oriented questions.
- Only a small number reported systematically including "analysis and evaluation questions" in their lesson preparation plans.

2.3. Analysis of Student Questionnaire Results

The questionnaire, comprising 10 items, was administered to 78 third-year secondary students. The key results were as follows:

- Eighty-two percent of the students reported that most of the classroom questions focused solely on memorisation and comprehension.
- **Sixty-seven percent** stated that they feel motivated when asked questions that require their personal opinion or analysis.
- Only **49%** indicated that they felt sufficiently free to answer open-ended questions.

Section Three: Discussion of Results in light of the Educational Literature

Comparison of the Results with those of Previous Studies

- The findings of this study align with those of Belkacem (2021), who highlighted the weak integration of analytical questions in Algerian secondary education.
- They also reinforce the arguments of Facione (1990) and Paul and Elder (2001), who emphasise that classroom environments must foster reflective and critical thinking through systematic questioning.

Barriers Limiting the Use of Critical Questions

An analysis of the results and teacher interviews revealed the following main barriers:

- Limited time allocated to lessons.
- Overloaded curricula that require teachers to cover extensive content.
- A lack of structured pedagogical training in critical thinking.
- Traditional assessment methods focus primarily on model answers.

Importance of Teacher Training in Critical Questioning

The critical pedagogy literature (Brookfield, 2012; Halpern, 1999) suggests that fostering critical thinking is not solely dependent on content delivery but also on the way questions are posed to stimulate deep understanding and connections between concepts. This skill is notably absent in many secondary school classrooms, highlighting the need for structured teacher training in the formulation of critical and analytical questions.

The analysis revealed that the majority of the classroom questions focused on the first and second levels of thinking (remembering and understanding). In contrast, the proportion of questions requiring analysis, evaluation, or creativity remains low. This limits the effectiveness

of the classroom in developing critical thinking skills. The quality of questions has a direct effect on the overall quality of classroom interaction, as well as on students' thinking processes and cognitive development.

Conclusion

This study sought to shed light on the relationship between comprehension questions posed by teachers in the classroom and their potential to foster critical thinking among secondary school students. It employs an analytical approach incorporating both quantitative and qualitative tools (content analysis, questionnaires, and classroom observation). The findings indicated that although classroom questions play a vital role in promoting interaction, they are often underutilised in developing higher-order thinking skills, with declarative and traditional questions dominating over analytical and critical ones.

The sample revealed that the majority of questions posed during lessons revolved around information recall and superficial understanding. In contrast, questions requiring analysis, comparison, and evaluative judgment are relatively scarce, if not absent, in some subjects. Nevertheless, data from questionnaires and classroom observations highlighted an apparent willingness among students to engage with open-ended questions, which enabled them to think independently and express their personal viewpoints.

The study also demonstrated that teachers often fail to pay sufficient attention to formulating questions aligned with the objectives of critical thinking development. This is mainly due to a lack of systematic pedagogical training in this area, combined with curriculum demands and time constraints.

Recommendations

On the basis of the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed to enhance the role of comprehension questions in classrooms, making them an effective tool for fostering critical thinking among learners:

1. Systematic teacher training in the construction of classroom questions should be provided, with a particular focus on those that target higher-order thinking skills (analysis, evaluation, and creativity).
2. The use of open-ended questions across all subjects, not only in literary disciplines, should be encouraged to prompt students to express their opinions and justify their reasoning.

3. Bloom's taxonomy is adopted as a reference framework for planning and distributing questions in a balanced manner that addresses different cognitive levels.
4. Dedicated modules or competencies for critical thinking should be integrated into official curricula and implemented through daily classroom practices.
5. The time constraints during lessons should be reduced to allow space for classroom discussions and the adoption of active teaching methods (e.g., brainstorming, interactive discussions, and problem-solving activities).
6. Foster a culture of dialogue within classrooms and value students' personal viewpoints, thereby boosting their confidence and encouraging analytical thinking.
7. To develop assessment tools to include indicators for measuring critical thinking skills rather than merely evaluating knowledge acquisition.

Cultivating a critical and informed society cannot be achieved without an educational system that prioritises intellectual growth, encouraging young learners to question, scrutinise, and engage in dialogue. The deliberate use of well-designed classroom questions is a crucial step toward achieving balanced and rational education.

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