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CHILDREN AND THE CHALLENGES OF LANGUAGE ACQUISITION IN A MULTILINGUAL NIGERIA ENVIRONMENT

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the challenges of language acquisition of children in a multilingual environment. The researcher used immaculate heart primary school, orji, as the focal point. In line with the above, two research objectives, two research questions and two hypotheses guided the study. The theory used is Nativist theory. The study adopted survey design through the use questionnaire. The data collected were analyzed and tested by simple percentage and chi-square respectively. The study revealed English language is the major medium of instruction in the school the child attends and School environment compel the child to acquire English as a second language. The study concludes that child's social environment is a very significant factor in the process of language acquisition and that the child's mother tongue or language of immediate environment is threatened and at the verge of dying owing to the early acquisition of English as a second language. It was recommended that collaborate with curriculum developers, educators, and language experts to develop standardized curricula, instructional materials, and assessment tools that are suitable for bilingual and multilingual education contexts in Nigeria.

Keywords: children**,** language acquisition, multilingual, Nigeria environment, social environment, English language, second language.

Introduction

It is a fact that Nigeria is a multilingual nation. This is because of numerous ethnic nationalities that make up the country. To unite the people of the country in one language, English language is used as the language of communication between the people of different language and culture (Awonusi, 2004). Because of the multilingual nature of many nations, a second language or foreign language (like English language) was introduced. For that, English language – which is a second or foreign language – is used as the language of education, business, government and other social interactions. Another reason is that the colonial masters introduced the English language to Nigerians as they did not value

the native languages (Akujobi & Chukwu, 2012). The English Language was considered as the only official means of instruction in training people to serve in the government and the only official means of communication. Language is crucial to human existence and it stands at the centre of human affairs. In fact, it is of fundamental importance as it conveys ideas, desires and emotions of man. The importance of language as a vehicle of human communication has underscored the kind of attention given to its acquisition and development in a child.

Noan Chomsky proposed the best known and accepted theory of language acquisition termed Language Acquisition Device (LAD). Noan Chomsky is of the opinion that a child is not born blank, rather he/she has the linguistic predisposition to acquire the language of his/her community. This linguistic endowment has been described as the language faculty or language acquisition programme. The language faculty provides the child with a set of procedures for developing an internal grammar of his language on the basis of the speech input which he receives from the adult speakers of the language. Noan Chomsky calls this speech input which the child receives – 'the triggering experience'.

A child does not learn the language all at once, as language development is made up of overlapping stages, while language acquisition has its critical period of between ages 0 – 6 years. Language development then starts and progresses to the stage of competence. Ndimele (2024) notes that:

> *The language faculty endowment is not sufficient to enable a child to speak a language, rather in addition to the innate linguistic endowment, exposure to the linguistic data is crucial to the child to pick up any language", i.e., the child's language acquisition programme will remain ineffective unless there is sufficient exposure to linguistic data in the form of a natural language.*

Ndimele's assertion goes a long way to show that language acquisition and development are dependent upon some factors such as the milieu or the type of contacts that a child has during his linguistic puberty and that is why this study investigated language acquisition in children born in multilingual environment with a view to determining the influence environment has on a child's second language acquisition and the effect of this acquisition on Nigerian indigenous languages.

Wallwork (1985) reviewed in Okoli (1990) states that home background of the child decides more than anything the quality of his mastery of language, for this is where he/she has experienced it most day in day out, and over the years of infancy and childhood. The linguistic setting of orji community in Owerri North LGA of Imo State where this

study is based already favours the use of English to bridge the communication gap created by multilingualism, so the parents of a heterogeneous family have no option than to adopt English as a language of communication in the home. This keeps the parents' native languages silent for 'some time', since a dominant language has been chosen for communication. In this case, the child's first language is neither the father's nor the mother's native language. In a bilingual family, a child develops a 'first' language rather than a mother tongue. There are still cases where the child tries to pick some vocabularies from the mother's language, perhaps due to the fact that the mother is always closer to him. The child, at best, becomes a bilingual. This is also another reason for choosing bilingual children for this study.

In 2006, UNESCO predicted that minor African languages will go extinct by the year 2050 (cf. Okwor, 2012), Chukwudile (2012). As Chukwudile (2012, p. 4) notes, one factor that preserves the language of a people is the people being fond of speaking it in the homes, schools, offices, market place, in the media, churches, in traditional ceremonies, in political rallies and other business transactions. If children will be speaking them in 100 years, as Krass (2017) also emphasizes, it will thrive; but it will be endangered if children will probably not be speaking them in 100 years and the language will be moribund if children are not speaking them now. UNESCO's prediction is, thus, an indication that African languages are at risk. If the child's environment does not favour the use of indigenous languages, then parents have a role to play, especially mothers in the child's formative years since the child generally acquires his/her first speech habits from his/her mother. Unfortunately, many parents forbid their children from speaking their mother tongues even at home, yet language as a living organism grows if it is being spoken, but dies if people stop speaking it. Does this imply that UNESCO's prediction will come to pass?

This research was conducted in orji community. Therefore, a child born into this kind of environment must of necessity require a second language other than his mother tongue or first language to serve as a lingua franca. English which is mostly spoken by the majority of the people in the area tend to serve that function.

Statement of the Problem

The multilingual nature of Nigeria is already reading to the gradual extinction of our indigenous languages and if this dangerous trend is not checked, it will in the next few years, as UNESCO predicted, start manifesting and the crises will be greater than that of economic and political problems that the country presently faces. Although the child is naturally endowed with a language faculty that enables him acquire any language, this endowment is, however, not enough for him to attain full competence in language use. The child, as Agbedo (2023) notes, requires sustained interaction with other language users in order to bring

the latent language faculty into operation within a given language. This is why a child can acquire another language (a second language) that is not the mother tongue as a result of his environment.

Purpose of the Study

The main aim of carrying out this research was to investigate challenges of language acquisition of children in a multilingual environment. Specifically, the study set out to:

1. find out the medium of instruction in the schools the child attends;
2. investigate whether environment compels the child to acquire English as a second language.

Research Questions

Based on our research objectives, the following research questions shall guide the study.

1. What is the medium of instruction in the school the child attends?
2. Does the school environment compel the child to acquire English as a second language?

Research Hypotheses

$H0_1$: English language is the major medium of instruction in the school the child attends.
$H0_2$: School environment compel the child to acquire English as a second language

Scope of the Study

The subject scope of this study covered Challenges of language acquisition of children in a multilingual environment. The study is also restricted to primary 5 and 6 children in Immaculate Heart of Mary Primary School, Orji, Owerri North LGA, Imo State.

Review of Related Literature

According to Agbedo (2023, P.74), the earliest recorded attempt at investigating language acquisition was the study carried out by a German biologist named Tiedermann in 1787. Other similar studies include those of Darwin (1877), Taine (1877) and Preyer (1882). Preyer's study, as Agbedo, also notes, made detailed dairy notes of the first three-year development of the researcher's son and this falls within the period that Ingram (1989, P.7) calls the period of dairy studies. This was because the preferred data collection method during this period was the parental dairy in which parents followed their children's development; writing down each utterance, noting the pronunciation and apparent meaning.

Anyanwu (2002) examined language acquisition: concepts and issues. According to him, one striking characteristic of the human person and something that distinguishes him from any other animal is the ability to use language in its most dynamic form, namely speech. Every human society possesses a language which is physiologically expressed in the vocal system and used in exchanging views about the universe. The physiological expression of language in the vocal system not only marks man out from other animals but must

also be seen as part of the special endowments giving man the ability to order his society in a way the lower animals cannot attempt.

In this direction, language is not inherited. Every normal human person is born with the capacity to master the language spoken in his immediate environment and he achieves this complex task over time starting from the moment of his birth such that by the time he has attained six years and above, he has become a user of that language (Anyanwu, 2002). This process by which an erstwhile "deaf and dumb" child gets to understand and speak the language of his society is called "language acquisition". He listed the methods of language acquisition to include informal nature of the programme or process, the environmental influence, issues in maturationally and many others. The work also examined theories of language acquisition, nature – nurture controversy in language acquisition, stages of language acquisition, and relevance of language acquisition. The study used only secondary sources of data. Based on that, there is a need to carry out present study which will use primary and secondary sources of data. Not only that, the above work focused on language acquisition alone but the present study focused on the influence of first language in the study of English language in Nigeria.

Abdullahi (2012) opines that the English Language is a major school subject in the Nigerian education system. It is not only a medium of instruction at all levels of education in Nigeria, but a pre-requisite to entering into post-secondary institutions. He observed that the importance of the English Language in Nigeria dates back to the colonial era. The original British aim for teaching English in Nigeria was reinforced by the Christian education which employee the English Language in school in teaching the pupils reading, writing and arithmetic. In 1982, the education code made the use of English Language imperative at all school levels in Nigeria and since then English Language is the medium through which candidates are taught and examined.

English as a second language (L2) in Nigeria, its teaching and learning require a tremendous effort to be accomplished, especially at the primary and secondary school levels. This is because the language manifests characteristic features that are different from our indigenous languages. The research also used only secondary sources of data; hence the need for the present study which is set to use both primary and secondary sources of data.

According to Jacob (2010) research on English language spellings and pronunciation in Nigeria. He asserts that there is a gross inconsistency between English spelling and its pronunciation. Also, there are cases where one phoneme is being represented by two letters of the alphabet, or two phonemes are being represented by one letter of the alphabet. This is a great departure from what is obtainable in our indigenous languages.

English language is an indispensable tool, in the sense that the struggle for independence was done through the medium of English, and several political concepts and ideas used to mobilize the public for political consciousness were derived from the language. English language which has become rooted in the country came as a result of British colonization of Nigeria and since then, it has been the language of information, judiciary, administration, government, science and technology, education and international communication etc. Nordquist defined English as a Second Language as 'a traditional term for the use or study of the English language by non-native speakers (Web). The colonial masters introduced the English language to Nigerians as they did not value the native languages (Jacob, 2010). He above study only uses literature review approach and did not consider primary data.

Also, there are many studies on multilingual environment. Research by Orlunga, (2023) states that the benefits of bilingual and multilingual medium of instruction policies in Nigeria has the potential to create a more inclusive learning environment, addressing the diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds of students. This approach aligns with the principles of inclusive education, which emphasize the importance of accommodating all learners, including those with disabilities and those from various linguistic backgrounds. The Nigerian National Policy on Education recognizes the need for inclusivity, aiming to foster peaceful coexistence among its diverse populace.

Orlunga, (2023) research indicates that bilingual and multilingual classrooms can enhance the learning experiences of students with disabilities when teachers are adequately prepared to navigate the complexities of such environments, highlights the necessity for teachers to focus on the division of labor in bilingual classrooms to prevent exclusionary practices that may arise from rigid adherence to evaluation systems. This is echoed by, who emphasizes the importance of continuous professional development for teachers to effectively implement inclusive education practices (Oyetoro, 2019). By equipping educators with the necessary skills and knowledge, the potential for creating an inclusive atmosphere in bilingual settings increases significantly. Furthermore, the benefits of bilingual and multilingual education extend beyond academic performance to social acceptance among students (McGuire, 2021). This finding suggests that bilingual education can serve as a bridge for social integration, which is crucial in a multicultural society like Nigeria.

According to (Dadzie, 2004), multilingualism is a situation where "people can have competence in more than two languages at various levels of competence… (P.1)". From this, it means that nations can also be said to be multilingual when more than two languages are used at various levels and for various purposes. The term

"multilingualism" is closely tied to bilingualism in the sense that there is more than one language in use at a particular time. With this in mind, the terms bilingualism and multilingualism are used interchangeably in this paper to refer to the use of two or more languages, at the individual and societal levels. Nigeria being a nation with many languages and many cultures is therefore a multilingual and multicultural society.

In addition to social benefits, the pedagogical strategies employed in bilingual classrooms, such as translanguaging, play a critical role in enhancing student engagement and learning outcomes discusses how teachers can utilize translanguaging practices to facilitate communication and understanding among students from diverse linguistic backgrounds. This approach not only validates students' home languages but also promotes a richer learning experience by allowing them to draw on their full linguistic repertoire (Set, 2023). The recognition of students' linguistic diversity as a resource rather than a barrier is essential for fostering an inclusive educational environment. Moreover, the positive impact of bilingualism on classroom participation and academic performance has been documented in various studies suggest that bilingual students often exhibit better

Performance and participation compared to their monolingual peers Pormouzeh and Azar (2015). This finding underscores the importance of multilingual and bilingual education policies that support active engagement and learning among all students, particularly in a context where educational equity is a pressing concern. In conclusion, the adoption of bilingual and multilingual medium of instruction policies in Nigeria is not merely a pedagogical choice but a necessary step towards achieving an inclusive educational framework. By recognizing and harnessing the linguistic diversity of students, educators can create learning environments that are equitable and conducive to the success of all learners. The integration of inclusive practices, continuous professional development for teachers, and the promotion of social acceptance through bilingual education are vital components in realizing this vision. Bilingual infants vary in the specific languages they encounter, be they spoken or signed.

These languages can be similar or different from each other on many different dimensions, such as their rhythm city, speech sound inventories, and word order, to name a few. Languages from the same family (e.g., Romance languages) tend to be similar on multiple dimensions. Many studies have also been carried out to investigate the language abilities of children from different environments or settings. Dautsch (1963) provided evidence to show that children from a low socio-economic background have a linguistic experimental history that has restricted their language activity. A similar, but expensive research was also conducted by Rychman (1964) to establish that children from low-socio-

economic background are handicapped in the general area of language ability.

Deese (1970) reviewed in Okoli (1990) notes that "the development of language in children is sensitive to the kind of environment in which they live", in that a child who lives under-institutionalized condition (such as those found in the hospitals and orphanages) during their critical years of infancy and early childhood are retarded in both linguistic and motor development.

Theoretical Framework

This research is anchored on nativist theory of language. Noam Chomsky propounded the nativist theory of language in 1957 with the publication of his book "Syntactic Structures". This theory suggests that humans are born with an innate capacity for language, a concept often referred to as Universal Grammar. The nativist theory of language, proposes that humans are born with an innate capacity for language acquisition, often referred to as the Language Acquisition Device (LAD). This theory suggests that children are not simply imitating language but are equipped with a pre-programmed understanding of grammatical rules, enabling them to learn language rapidly and effortlessly. Nativists believe that humans have a biological predisposition for language, meaning that certain aspects of language structure are hardwired into the brain at birth.

Chomsky proposed the concept of "universal grammar," suggesting that all languages share fundamental underlying principles and structures. Language Acquisition Device (LAD) is a hypothetical mental mechanism that enables children to process linguistic information, identify patterns, and acquire the rules of their native language. Nativists argue that the input children receive from their environment is often limited and imperfect, yet they quickly and accurately learn their native language. This suggests that children are not simply learning through imitation but are actively applying innate knowledge of language. Nativists often link language acquisition to a critical period in development, suggesting that there is a specific window of time during which language learning is most efficient and effective. In essence, the nativist theory contrasts with behaviorist perspectives that view language learning as solely based on imitation and reinforcement. Instead, it emphasizes the role of innate biological factors in shaping language development.

Research Methodology

Research Design

The descriptive survey research design was adopted. The reason is that it encourages the use of primary data through questionnaire.

Population of the Study

The population was made up of the entire 56 children (students) in primary 5 and 6 in Immaculate Heart Primary Schools Orji, Owerri North, Imo State. The pupils in primary 5-6 were used because they are in a position to provide information on the subject matter.

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Sample Size Determination

To ensure the determination of accurate sample size, the statistical formula derived by Taro Yamane (1964) was employed. The formula states thus:

$$n = \frac{N}{1+N(e)^2}$$

Therefore;

$$n = \frac{N}{1+N(e)^2}$$

$$n = \frac{56}{1 + 56\ (0.05)^2}$$

$$n = \frac{56}{1 + 56\ (0.0025)}$$

$$n = \frac{56}{1 + 0.14}$$

$$n = \frac{56}{1.14}$$

$$n = 49$$

Sampling Technique

This study adopted simple random technique where all the respondents have equal right of being selected in the course of the study.

Instrument for data collection

The instrument for this study is questionnaire. The questionnaire was designed in four-point scale which includes SA = Strongly Agreed, A = Agree, D = Disagreed, SD = Strongly Disagreed.

Validity of the Instrument

Validity refers to the ability of a test to measure what it purports to measure (Asika, 2008). The validity of this study is measured based on the content of the questionnaires used for extracting the data from the respondents. This is a kind of content validity. Content validity was used.

Validity of the Instrument

A test is considered reliable if we get similar result repeatedly (Nwodu, 2006). This research adopted test-retest method to measure the reliability of the data collection process standard deviation was used to find out the deviation from the mean between test period and retest period.

Data Analysis Techniques

The data collected are analyzed and tested by simple percentage and chi-square respectively

$$X2 = \frac{(Fo - Fe)^2}{Fe}$$

Where: X^2 = chi-square
Fo = observed frequency
Fe = expected frequency

Decision Rule: Accept the alternate hypothesis in a situation in which the calculated value is greater than the tabulated or critical value.

Discussion of Findings

This section covers data presentation and analysis. It should be noted that out of 49 copies of the questionnaire distributed, only 45 were return and used.

Data Presentation, Analysis and Data Presentation

Table 1: Distribution of respondents according to age

Age	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Below 10 years	15	33.3
10-11years	20	44.5
11 years and above	10	22.2
Total	**45**	**100**

Source: Field survey, 2025

Table 1 above shows 15 of the respondents representing 33.3% are 10years old, 20 of respondents representing 44.5% are 10-11years while 10 respondents representing 22.2% are 11years and above.

Table 2: Distribution of respondents according to class

Class	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Primary 5	20	44.4
Primary 6	25	55.6
Total	**45**	**100**

Source: Field survey, 2025

Table 2 above shows that 20 of respondents representing 44.4% are in class 5, while 25 of the respondents representing 55.6% are in class 6.

Question one: What languages are spoken in the child's environment?

Table 3: Responses on the language(s) spoken in the child's environment

Responses	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Igbo	21	46.67
English	20	44.45
Pidgin	2	4.44
Others	2	4.44
Total	**45**	**100**

Source: Field survey, 2025

Analysis of table 3 above showed that 46.67% of school speaks Igbo, 44.45% of the school speaks English, 4.44% of school speaks Pidgin while 4.44% speaks other language. This analysis indicated that the

most spoken language in the child's environment is Igbo.

Question two: What is the medium of instruction in the school the child attends?

Table 4: Responses on the medium of instruction in the schools the child attends

Responses	Frequency	Percentage (%)
English	25	55.6
Igbo	15	33.3
Others	5	11.1
Total	**45**	**100**

Source: Field survey, 2025

Analysis of table 4 above reveals that 55.5% of schools use English as the medium of instruction, 33.3% use Igbo, whereas 11.1% of use Other medium. This distribution reveals that the mostly widely used medium of instruction is English.

Question three: Does the school environment compel the child to acquire English as a second language?

Table 5: Responses on if whether school environment compels the child to acquire English as a second language,

Responses	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Strongly agree	21	46.67
Agree	20	44.45
Disagree	2	4.44
Strongly disagree	2	4.44
Total	**45**	**100**

Source: Field survey, 2025

Analysis of table 5 above reveals that 46.67% of the respondent strongly agreed that school environment compels the child to acquire English as a second language, 44.45% agreed, 4.44% disagreed while 4.44% of the respondents strongly disagreed. Since the percentage of those who agreed is greater signifies that school environment compels the child to acquire English as a second language.

Question four: What are the consequences of a child acquiring English as a second language in orji community Imo State?

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Table 6: Responses on the consequences of a child's acquisition of English as a second language in Orji, Imo State.

Responses	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Poor Igbo language learning	21	46.67
Improved students' performance in English	20	44.45
Neglect of other language	2	4.44
Low language development	2	4.44
Total	**45**	**100**

Source: Field survey, 2025

Analysis of table 6 above showed that 46.67% of the respondents choose Poor Igbo language learning as the consequences of a child's acquisition of English as a second language, 44.45% of the respondents choose improved students' performance in English, 4.44% choose neglect of other language while 4.44% choose low language development.

Test of Hypotheses

In testing the hypothesis formulated, it is important to restate the hypothesis for the test.

Restatement of Hypothesis One

$H0_1$: English language is the major medium of instruction in the school the child attends.

Data in table 4 was used to test hypothesis one.

Options	No of respondents
Agreed	10
Disagreed	35
Total	**45**

$$\text{Expected Frequency} = \frac{\text{Total number of respondents}}{\text{Number of options}}$$

$$\text{Expected Frequency} = \frac{45}{2} = 22.5$$

Fo	Fe	Fo – Fe	$(Fo - Fe)^2$	$(Fo - Fe)^2 / Fe$
10	22.5	-12.5	156.25	6.94
35	22.5	12.5	156.25	6.94
Total				**13.88**

X^2 calculated value = 13.88

Decree of freedom (df) is (row – 1) x (column – 1) that is (2 – 1) x (2 – 1) = 1

X^2 tabulated at 5% level of significance with 1 degree of freedom = 3.841

Decision Rule

Because X^2 calculated is greater than X^2 tabulated (i.e 13-88 > 3.841), the null hypothesis is thus hereby rejected whereas the alternate is accepted. This decision thus signifies that English language is the major medium of instruction in the school the child attends.

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Restatement of Hypothesis two

H0$_2$: School environment compel the child to acquire English as a second language

Data in table 5 was used to test hypothesis two.

Options	**No of respondents**
Agreed	4
Disagreed	41
Total	**45**

$$\text{Expected Frequency} = \frac{\text{Total number of respondents}}{\text{Number of options}}$$

$$\text{Expected Frequency} = \frac{45}{2} = 22.5$$

Fo	**Fe**	**Fo – Fe**	**(Fo – Fe)^2**	**(Fo – Fe)^2 / Fe**
4	22.5	-18.5	342.25	15.21
41	22.5	18.5	342.25	15.21
Total				**30.42**

X^2 calculated value = 30.42

Decree of freedom (df) is (row – 1) x (column – 1) that is (2 – 1) x (2 – 1) = 1

X^2 tabulated at 5% level of significance with 1 degree of freedom = 3.841.

Decision Rule

As X^2 calculated is greater than X^2 tabulated (i.e., 30-42 > 3.841), the null hypothesis is thus hereby rejected whereas the alternate is accepted. This decision signifies that School environment compel the child to acquire English as a second language.

Discussion of Findings

For the hypothesis one, it was found that English language is the major medium of instruction in the school the child attends. English is mostly directed to the child, in addition to the mother tongue in basic educational system in Nigeria (Anyanwu, 2002).

For hypothesis two, it was found that School environment compel the child to acquire English as a second language. According to Jacob (2010) parents had to start as early as possible to introduce the English language at home and use the mother tongue alongside it. It was also gathered that the parents of these children speak their various mother tongues at home, but prefer to speak English to the child for the purpose of integration into the society. According to Agbedo (2023) the medium of instruction in the schools investigated is English since English is the language of instruction in Nigeria.

Conclusion

This study is on challenges of language acquisition of children in a multilingual environment. Basically, children whose

parents are highly educated and who already speak English at home as their first language along with their mother tongues, acquiring English as a second language was with ease. English was only reinforced in the school environment where it is the medium of communication.

In the schools used for this study, it was discovered that there are regulations forbidding the use of indigenous languages. In other words, English is enforced. At home, parents are also forced to speak English to the children to enable them communicate outside the home. The result of all these is the gradual acquisition of English as a second language which is made possible by influence of the environment the child finds his/herself leading to the extinction of Nigerian languages.

This study, therefore, concluded that the child's social environment is a very significant factor in the process of language acquisition and that the child's mother tongue or language of immediate environment is threatened and at the verge of dying owing to the early acquisition of English as a second language.

Recommendations

The study recommends for:

1. Engage with local communities, parents, and caregivers to garner support for bilingual and multilingual education initiatives. Foster partnerships with community organizations, cultural institutions, and language advocates to promote the value of linguistic diversity and to encourage the use of indigenous languages in education.
2. Conduct research and evaluation studies to assess the effectiveness of bilingual and multilingual education programs in Nigeria. Gather evidence-based data on student outcomes, teacher practices, and program implementation to inform policy decisions, improve program quality, and advocate for continued investment in bilingual and multilingual education.

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