



# Learning Together Through Shared Book Reading: Experiences of Burmese Refugee Mothers and Their Preschoolers

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## Abstract

Shared book reading at home is a beneficial language and literacy learning experience for young children. While there has been extensive research on shared book reading in general, more is needed on understanding what this looks like for multilingual refugee families and their preschool children, particularly among Burmese families in the United States. Past research has focused on literacy development among Burmese refugee children in the school context, but few studies exist on shared book reading among Burmese refugees and their preschoolers in the home context. This qualitative study highlights four Burmese mothers and their young children's use of dual language books in shared book reading while incorporating interactive reading strategies like questioning, pointing and extratextual talk. Findings indicate that these mothers' capacities to engage in book talk and scaffolding promote children's and caregivers' literacy skills. The study also highlights the need for resources and interventions that might be developed to support these families in their efforts to boost young children's literacy using shared book reading strategies.

**Keywords** Refugees · Shared book reading · Literacy · Young children · Dual language books

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) (2019), refugees intimately experience the backlash of war and conflict. They are often displaced from their countries of origin with little notice or no choice, resulting in separated families and communities and limited resources. There are 7.4 million school-aged refugee children worldwide with limited access to education, and 4 million that are unable to attend school. Families moving to the United States significantly increased between 1980 and 2016, with most refugees coming from countries in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East (Cun, 2019; Li, 2018). These numbers illustrate the impact on refugees forced into making life-changing decisions with limited support (UNCHR, 2019). Political and religious persecution may force young children and their families to flee to neighboring countries before moving to other host countries (Cun, 2021). For Burmese refugees, political crisis, military control, and subsequently poor living conditions led them to flee in the

thousands to other Southeast Asian countries (Fee, 2019). Reports indicate that most refugees resettled in the United States came from Burma (Krogstad, 2019) and were the second largest group (about 21%) in the U.S. (Migration Policy Institute, 2018).

The term "Burmese" generally refers to persons born in Burma and to persons of Burman (or Burmese) ethnicity for whom Burmese is their first language and that are the majority ethnic group in Burma (Centers for Disease Control & Prevention, 2010). Burma (formerly Myanmar) has a unique cultural and linguistic background represented by many languages and ethnicities, with the Burmese language being the most spoken (69%). Other minority languages include Sgaw (pronounced Skaw), Karen, Karenni, Kaya, Chin, Pa-o Karen, and many more (Centers for Disease Control & Prevention, 2010). Over the years, in search of freedom, safety, and improved living conditions, hundreds of thousands of Burmese individuals of all ages fled their homes to neighboring countries in Southeast Asia such as India and Thailand. Those resettled in the United States likely spent time in several other countries at refugee camps, surrounded by many different cultures and languages. When refugee families with young children settle into the United States, they must start navigating complicated childhood education

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systems that require their children to speak and read in English (Fee, 2019). For many refugees, acculturating to United States school requirements is a fast and confusing process that may require changes in their home routines.

Most often, refugees have not had access to extensive formal education nor have had their education interrupted by war and conflict in their countries of origin. Furthermore, they may receive limited educational opportunities and resources in neighboring countries (Cun, 2021) through which they transit in their resettlement process. Due to differences in their countries of origin, acclimating to the school structure may be particularly difficult and present various challenges and needs for these families and their young children when resettling in a host country (Cun, 2019, 2021; Fike & Androff, 2016; Lee et al., 2015). In the United States, early childhood professionals are particularly concerned about the English-learning experiences of refugee families with young children that have goals of learning English before the children enter the U.S. school system (Anderson & Anderson, 2021; Authors, 2021; Muennig et al., 2015).

Refugee preschool children and their parents may lack access to educational resources and could benefit from different educational support (Cun, 2021; Wofford & Tibi, 2018). While acknowledging the immense challenges these families have been exposed to, their cultural and social diversity is rich with experiences; they are a cultural asset and an educational resource (Cun, 2021; Moll et al., 2013) whose knowledge and skills should be valued. For instance, their strengths, such as knowing multiple languages and having multiple social and cultural identities, should be highlighted and challenge the stereotypical view that refugees have limited identities and need help (Anderson & Anderson, 2021; Cun, 2021; Hope, 2008).

## Reading with Young Children

Exposing young children to books at an early age promotes their overall literacy development. Research shows that young children entering formal schooling with poor oral language and vocabulary development are at high risk for reading difficulties and overall school failure (Morgan & Meier, 2008). The risk is disproportionately high for recent immigrant and refugee preschoolers from multilingual/multicultural communities. Many young children, from homes where book reading is a daily or frequent routine, enter school with many hours of experience with books (Simsek & Erdogan, 2015). Conversely, others enter school with fewer hours of book reading and fewer experiences with books (Pillinger & Wood, 2014).

There are different forms of reading with young children that have been known to yield great benefits. Shared book

reading, also referred to as interactive book reading, is one such method of reading with young children that has been used extensively to promote children's literacy (Wessels & Trainin, 2023; Partridge, 2004). This method of reading incorporates extratextual talk through open-ended questioning, commenting, and prompting to encourage children to actively participate during book reading; and enhances children's ability to attain vocabulary and print knowledge (Hassinger et al., 2016; Lynch et al., 2008; Mol et al., 2009). According to Luo et al. (2014), shared book reading serves as an experience that provides children the opportunity to engage in rich verbal conversations based on the text, thereby strengthening their vocabulary, and promoting interaction. Likewise, child engagement increases through questioning techniques encouraging child participation (Hammer & Sawyer, 2016). Open-ended questions increase child engagement by encouraging their attentive processing of story information (Blewitt & Langan, 2016). Following children's answers to questions or comments about the book, adult verbal responsiveness impacts how young children engage during shared book reading (Hammer & Sawyer, 2016; Tamis-LeMonda et al., 2006). According to these researchers, parents should respond promptly, depending on the child's focus of attention, and provide supportive feedback. Adult verbal responsiveness supports word learning through promptness, contingency, and the joint focus of attention between the child and adult (Blewitt & Langan, 2016). Thus, how families read with their young children contributes to literacy development.

Effective scaffolding during book reading is often demonstrated in how parents label, comment, question, provide feedback, imitate, relate, and read (Evans et al., 2010). These experiences are significant for young children's learning because the interactions generally support the emergence of early literacy, language, and school readiness skills (Noble et al., 2020; Manning & Manning, 1992; Rezzonico et al., 2015). However, literacy practices among multilingual refugee families with diverse backgrounds are an area that remains understudied. In one study involving Iranian refugees, Kermani and Brenner (2000) highlight the cultural differences in how mothers use scaffolding in reading experiences with their young children. In this study, mothers took a more "direct" leadership approach while scaffolding and demonstrating high verbal communication with their children. This indicates that there may be other cultural differences in family book reading that would be helpful to teachers and practitioners seeking to understand how to serve these communities better.

Furthermore, studies have demonstrated the importance of refugee families and young children engaging in shared book reading at home (Authors, 2021; Boit et al., 2020; Kermani & Brenner, 2000; Muennig et al., 2015; Quadros & Sarroub, 2016; Singh et al., 2015). In a

study by Singh et al. (2015), eight Burmese refugee families successfully adapted specific book reading strategies due to modeling. The mothers had varying educational levels and they met once a week for one and a half hours at a public library to read with their young children and participate in the program activities. Additionally, each mother received a book in the mail during the program. With reliable access to books and reading techniques acquired in the program, the mothers embraced reading to their young children at home, modeling the practices they had learned in the program, and incorporating the new literacy practices into their traditional ways of using folktales, songs, and dance. Mothers in this study said they learned English during their time in the refugee camp (Singh et al., 2015), and in their use of both English and Karen (native language), they experienced new levels of interaction during book reading with their young children. Anderson and Anderson (2021) found similar results in their assessment of an English language program for refugee families in Canada. Across all families with young children, parents shared that they enjoyed and relied on switching between their native language(s) and English to navigate conversations and understand the reading materials.

Another form of shared book reading that is known to benefit young children's literacy is dialogic reading; which involves adults reading with the children, rather than to the children (Irish & Parsons, 2016; Pillinger & Wood, 2014; Whitehurst, 1992; Whitehurst et al., 1994). In dialogic reading, adults read aloud with children and engage in conversations using a questioning method where adults prompt children in different ways, including filling in blanks at the end of a sentence, recalling parts of a story, asking open-ended questions to give children the opportunity to describe text or illustrations in details, prompting children with questions such as, "What?" "Where?" "When?" and "How?", as well as prompts that relate pictures and words in the book to children's own real lives. The adults do not merely correct the child's reading, rather they scaffold them into deeper conversations using questions during the book reading process. The goal of dialogic reading is to get parents, teachers, and caregivers to use the types of language that should help prepare young children for the language demands of the classroom (Brannon et al., 2013; Huebner & Payne, 2010).

Dialogic reading has been used extensively by parents and teachers of young children (Briesch et al., 2008; LaCour et al., 2013; Lever & Sénéchal, 2011; Towson & Gallagher, 2014), and in most cases, the program has had positive impacts on children's literacy skills (Pillinger & Wood, 2014). A study by Gillanders and Jimenez (2004) highlighted the role of parental active support and corresponding literacy practices at home as promoters of positive effects of bilingualism and consequently, literacy learning among a Mexican population. Studies show a need to model

the strategies of this method in a multilingual setting serving newly arrived refugees with limited or no English, as this method allows for active dialogue around pictures and words in the books.

Families are often willing and able to use interactive strategies that appeal to young children's literacy development and recognize the significance of book reading (Authors, 2021; Luo et al., 2014; Rodriguez et al., 2009; Singh et al., 2015; Salinas et al., 2015). Literature and theory point to the value of shared book reading with young children and the potential positive contribution of this experience on children's overall language and literacy development. A strong need persists among researchers to examine home-based shared book reading among refugee families in the U.S. and how this experience might best occur for English language learners. Although some studies have looked at refugee families and their experiences with shared book reading with their children, studies on how Burmese families and their preschool age children interact with books are limited (Singh et al., 2015). Specifically, more studies should explore how Burmese refugee mothers recently resettled in the United States engage in shared book reading with their young children.

## Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory of Cognitive Development

To further understand what these learning and educational experiences look for refugees, we employed Vygotsky's theory to explore how shared book reading among Burmese refugee families in their homes may unfold in different cultural contexts (Vygotsky, 1978). In his sociocultural theory, Lev Vygotsky highlighted that a child's development could not be separated from their cultural environment (Vygotsky, 1978). The cultural routines surrounding a child, either at home or school, promote cognitive development, with learning and action leading to knowledge. Vygotsky recognized the central importance of language, which he referred to as a mental tool, in shaping thinking and guiding development (Bodrova, 1997). Learning to read and write contains powerful cultural tools that enable a child to function at higher levels of symbolic abstraction (Bodrova, 1997). These abilities do not appear spontaneously but develop through interactions with more knowledgeable others in teaching and learning.

The teaching/learning relationship within the zone of proximal development (ZPD) always exists within a cultural context (Scrimsher & Tudge, 2003). Therefore, the way children in the U.S. urban school system are taught to read may differ from Burma's teaching/learning experiences. The ZPD represents a teachable continuum where the lower end of the continuum is characterized by what a child can achieve independently, while

the upper end represents what the child can accomplish with assistance (Bodrova, 1997). The technique used in the ZPD to scaffold the child can be applied to shared book reading experiences where adults use language to scaffold the child during reading. As Scrimsher and Tudge (2003) highlight in their discussion of the implications of Vygotsky's theory, we cannot accurately think about the ZPD without recognizing that both individuals (i.e., the child and peer or adult) are simultaneously engaged in teaching and learning as they scaffold one another. Consideration should be made on both individuals involved in these interactions within the cultural context of shared book reading. For example, young children actively contribute during these exchanges by bringing their early-developing English speaking and reading skills and personal qualities to the experience.

Likewise, Miller's (2016) work elaborates on this concept by specifically suggesting that studies using Vygotsky's framework need to consider parent and child behaviors, the shift in responsibilities within the activity over time, and how a parent may be changing approaches based on the child's behaviors or levels of learning. In our project, a parent's ability to scaffold their young children by using different questioning techniques while they interact with bilingual books may promote literacy learning. This interactive process is influenced by social and linguistic contexts, so that these refugee parents necessarily draw upon their linguistic and cultural backgrounds as they engage in their social contexts. Ultimately, the standard techniques of promoting literacy through shared book reading strategies in the U.S. must be examined to understand if this approach encourages teaching and learning for young Burmese refugee children and their families.

Our study aimed to explore how Burmese mothers support their young children's literacy using shared book reading strategies while reading bilingual books together. The following research questions guided the study: First, to what extent do the mothers incorporate the strategies of shared book reading introduced to them? And second, how do Burmese mothers and their young children experience shared book reading over time? We hope that this work will impact the field of early childhood by illuminating the literacy needs and strengths as exemplified by observed home-based shared book reading experiences of Burmese refugees. These refugee parent-child experiences should be referenced when developing new strategies for effectively supporting families from diverse backgrounds.

## Positionality Statement

Two university professors and three graduate research assistants specializing in Human Development and Family Studies conducted this study. Out of the five researchers,

three were born and raised in North America, while two were originally from Africa. In addition to speaking English, the two born outside of North America each speak two additional languages. None of the researchers spoke any of the participants' languages and, therefore, relied on interpreters for communication. The interpreters were known to most participants, as they had interacted together in a different project, and this paved the way for establishing trust-building. To strengthen trust, attention was paid to how researchers communicated and interacted with participants. For instance, all interactions were carefully designed to focus on the families and their young children, and any activities were planned in such a way that they brought out strengths in families' experiences. Furthermore, participants and researchers developed relationships through regular interactions as the research project progressed. In the data analysis process, we mitigated bias that may exist due to our diverse backgrounds by ensuring at least two researchers were reading the same transcripts, watching the same videos, meeting together regularly and extensively reviewing notes, processes, and codes, and relying heavily on observations as well as interpreter's explanations. In the section that follows, we explain the various stages of the study by outlining the methods and design, recruitment of participants, procedures, and data collection as well as the method of analysis.

## Research Method and Design

The current study employed a qualitative case study methodology to uncover and understand the mother's experiences with their young children participating in shared book reading. A case study research approach facilitates the exploration of a phenomenon within its context using various data sources (Yin, 2009). This ensures that the focus is not just explored through one lens but a variety of lenses that allow for multiple facets of the phenomenon to be revealed and understood (Yin, 2009). In the current study, the unit of analysis is four Burmese mothers' experiences in shared book reading. The results of this study are descriptive, allowing for a deeper exploration and understanding of the experiences of each of the mothers being studied. These mothers' experiences were understood within their real-life contexts in which shared book reading occurred.

## Participants

Four mothers with their preschoolers participated in this study. These mothers were part of a larger literacy project which had been piloted earlier among various refugee communities with a focus on supporting children's literacy development. Trust had been established with these mothers during their participation in this more extensive literacy study. They were all originally from Burma and spoke Burmese

or a combination of Burmese and other native languages such as Karen, Karenni, or Kyan. They were recruited from a nonprofit agency serving newly arrived immigrants and refugees in the central region of a southeastern state of the United States.

Each of the families in the larger project were unique because they came from different parts of the world, spoke different languages like Swahili, Arabic, Burmese, Nepali and their needs were different. This sub-group of Burmese mothers was recruited to participate in a parallel project that would be more focused on supporting parents to incorporate the strategies of shared book reading while engaging in book conversations with their preschoolers. While these families had been introduced to book conversations, the larger study did not focus on this sub-culture's experiences implementing shared book reading strategies. The study was reviewed by the University Institutional Review Board (IRB), and informed consent was obtained from the 4 mothers. Pseudonyms have been used in this study to protect their identity. Information about each of the mothers is presented in Appendix 1.

### Data Collection

All four mothers preferred that the project activities be conducted through home visits as this was convenient and they would be in their natural environment as they read with their children. With the help of a Burmese interpreter, four researchers consulted with the families to schedule different meeting times spread out in 4 phases over eight months. The researchers and the interpreter developed individualized schedules for family visits, with each visit lasting between 60–90 min. Every visit consisted of two researchers and an interpreter. Each family received dual language books, and in appreciation for their participation, they received a \$20 gift card during each visit.

Dual language books for young children written in both English and Burmese languages were bought from an online store (languagelizard.com) that sells multicultural children's books. There was less variety of books in these languages to choose from and therefore as a research team, we agreed on four popular children's books. They included the following titles and authors, *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* (Eric Carle), *Walking Through the Jungle* (Debbie Harter), *Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?* (Bill Martin), and *Goodnight Moon* (Margaret Wise Brown). All the books selected for the study were simple children's books containing many pictures, large print, few short sentences, and contained repetitive or rhyming words. Care was taken in selecting books with animal themes depicting wildlife from around the world. The purpose of dual language books for this population ensured that families felt comfortable reading in the language they were most familiar with. Each of the

four families received a copy of each of the books. For more descriptions of the books, see "Supplementary Materials".

Interviewing and observations were the main methods utilized in data collection, and to enhance data credibility, we recorded interviews and reading sessions and took field notes of what we observed. Each home visit lasted 60–90 min. The next section provides detailed descriptions of the study activities presented in the four phases.

During Phase I, we held conversations with each family to learn about how they interacted with books in their homes and to understand reading practices they engaged in. With the aid of an interpreter, we asked parents to talk about things they did while reading books with their young children, such as, if they were asking any questions, type of questions they asked, how they held conversations around books, any challenges faced while reading with the children and, types of support they needed to promote engagement with books. Families had a home collection of dual language books from an earlier literacy study. The information gathered was critical background knowledge that guided how we identified specific family needs and how we introduced simple strategies to use while interacting with books at home. These conversations were audio-recorded.

During Phase II, we modelled shared book reading to individual families in the first month. Families were encouraged to pick a book from their home collection. As they read, one team member took notes while another read along with the family, encouraging sustained conversations while reading. When the family had demonstrated some comfort level, a dual language book (English and Burmese) titled, *Walking Through the Jungle*, was introduced. Although not in its entirety, the researchers modeled strategies that mirrored those of dialogic reading (Whitehurst et al., 1994). They included, reading aloud, asking open-ended questions, pointing at words, having conversations, and connecting the story to real-life experiences. After modeling, families practiced the modeled strategies using the language they were most comfortable in with the understanding that each mother would approach reading differently depending on their abilities. During the second month of this phase, we wanted to see if mothers incorporated any of the shared book reading strategies modeled to them and therefore mothers practiced reading using any dual language books. While they read, one of the researchers, engaged the family by occasionally modeling any shared book reading strategies modeled. At the end of each session, the families were acknowledged for their efforts in their reading approaches and encouraged to read every day. We took notes on behaviors that families portrayed while reading and the sessions were audio recorded.

In Phase III, we focused on more book reading practice sessions to capture the mothers' type and frequency of questions, gestures, focus of their conversations, languages used, and even how they chose the books to read. Each

family was visited twice within this three-month period. At the end of the reading sessions, the researchers provided feedback emphasizing their strengths and efforts and encouraging them to continue reading daily. While parents reported they practiced reading over time, we did not collect any specific data between phases on how frequently they were reading. These sessions were video recorded.

During Phase IV, the families were provided a new dual language book to read that they had not previously seen. We wanted to see if the shared book reading strategies employed while reading the books, they practiced with would transfer to unfamiliar books. We focused on learning how the mothers incorporated reading strategies into their interactions. Each family was visited twice, and researchers engaged in ongoing modelling of shared book reading strategies. The reading interactions were video recorded.

### Analysis

Specific attention focused on behaviors that aligned with shared book reading strategies that the families had been introduced to by the researchers. We focused on Phase II, III and IV to help answer our research questions, while Phase I provided the background information and full descriptions of the mothers. The analysis utilized different steps of coding qualitative data as proposed by Creswell (2013). First, each researcher began by listening to the audio recordings and watching the videos independently. They recorded general observations and insights about each family in a brief written memo, including relevant quotes from the mothers. The next step involved re-listening to audio recordings, re-watching video recordings, and intentionally coding for specific behaviors such as scaffolding strategies, child engagement, and comfort, shared reading techniques, and any changes that seem apparent from the previous phase. Specific attention was paid to code for verbal parent–child interactions, such as closed- and open-ended questioning, counting, naming colors and shapes, dual language conversation including statements regarding the story, and real-life connections. The next step involved creating profiles for each of the four Burmese mothers that included demographic information, audio, and video notes; any changes noted over time, most used strategies and behaviors, and any other detailed observations of the shared book reading experiences. The four researchers then selected one family profile and listened to the audio recordings to ensure our findings represented the family. At this point, we also sought additional quotes connected to the findings. For reliability purposes, each researcher reviewed profiles for thoroughness and verification ensuring that we truthfully represented the content of interviews, audio, and video observations.

### Findings

This study sought to explore how Burmese families incorporated the strategies of shared book reading while reading dual language books with their preschool children and learn about the families' experiences in shared book reading over time. From our initial conversations in Phase I, we learned that all the mothers mainly helped their children learn the alphabet and math, while less focus was placed on reading the stories in books. Nu Chewa shared, "...I am helping her to do the ABCs and all that, but I don't know how to read... so I only do those basic things." Pemela added that she also does the ABCs and only asks the child to write his name. While Naing spends some time reading with her children, she voiced that she wanted her son "to understand number[s] and the alphabet before going [to] school, because it's maybe easier for the teacher to teach him. We start a, b, c, d but this... not interesting to read. He just trying to start speaking so he just want to look at the picture, not the word."

In terms of mothers' current shared book reading practices, Pemela mentioned that she occasionally asks simple questions such as "what is this?" and expects the child to memorize the answers and recall when asked the next time. Naing shared how she prioritized stocking up on animal-related theme books because her son liked animals and hoped that this would help spark her son's interest in reading. She stated in the interview, "He really liked dinosaurs. He tried to learn different kind of a dinosaur name. But it is very difficult to name. But there are many different type of dinosaur!" Tara voiced her concern that while her son tends to ask questions, she did not know quite what to say: "... I do not ask him question...he just asks like "Where is this?" "What happened?" ... he asks all the time...sometimes, I don't know what to say. I struggle answering... what they ask."

The support provided by the researchers during shared book reading sessions was influenced by the mothers' indications that they did not know how to select age-appropriate books, how long to read with the children, and generally how to help them learn; with Nu Chewa summing it up by saying, "We don't have the knowledge." From this interaction we learned that the families did not have books written in their home languages. Given these mothers' sentiments, we sought to answer the first research question that focused on understanding the extent to which the mothers incorporated the strategies of shared book reading introduced to them.

### Shared Book Reading Strategies

Our findings revealed that although all the families incorporated the shared book reading strategies modeled to

them, there were variations in the types of strategies used by individual mothers and how often they used them. All the families asked different types of questions, including open-ended, closed, and questions that related to real-life experiences. Over time, they started exploring new vocabulary by sounding out words, pointing while reading, and, most importantly, repeating and expanding on what the child says. The results indicate that each family experienced shared book reading differently. A detailed summary with examples on how families incorporated shared book reading strategies is presented in Table 1.

To fully depict the unfolding of shared book reading strategies, data was collected and qualitatively analyzed to answer the second question focusing on how Burmese mothers and their young children experienced shared book reading over time. This can be best described by elaborating on two themes that arose during data analysis: language dynamics within communication and comfort and engagement during shared book-reading sessions. Language dynamics describe how mothers and their children verbally communicated while reading books. Comfort and engagement cover how mothers and their children felt while learning about the shared book reading process.

### Language Dynamics Within Communication

Dyadic language dynamics and communication strategies were critical to the reading experience. Since the preschoolers were consistently more advanced in English than their mothers, families were observed to use both English and their native languages, and this may have had an impact on how they incorporated the shared book reading strategies. This language dynamic seemed to enrich their conversations as they all read comfortably and carried out discussions using multiple languages interchangeably. The mothers relied on their native languages to ask children questions, and the children switched between their native language and English, moving quite seamlessly between the languages, and there were no moments of confusion when reading in the different languages. Table 2 provides a detailed description of these scenarios for each family.

### Comfort and Engagement

From the data, we extrapolated that language dynamics and communication strategies also played into the families' comfort and engagement while interacting with books. Comfort was coded when mothers questioned themselves or their abilities or took charge of the shared book reading activity while engagement is used to describe the mothers' and preschoolers' attentiveness and interest in the book reading activity. Based on the coding of qualitative data, we infer that the comfort and engagement that families brought

into the reading context influenced how families read and changed over time. These findings reflecting the experiences of each of the mothers have been summarized and presented in Appendix 2.

## Discussion

These findings indicate that the Burmese mothers and their preschoolers engaged in various shared book reading strategies. Each of the mothers entered this study with different skills and ways of interacting with books resulting in personal growth over time. This was evident in how they effectively scaffolded their young children's learning by using descriptive language, asking open-ended questions, engaging them in conversations about the story, maintaining their young children's attention, and pointing at pictures and words. A pronounced strength was that these families were not afraid to use their preferred language(s) when discussing books with their children; they were comfortable using English and their native languages interchangeably.

Moreover, the preschool children started responding with increasingly elaborative answers, questions, and comments during book reading. This is in line with previous research that has pointed to the value of book reading strategies in boosting young children's literacy development (Authors, 2021; Hindman et al., 2014; Wofford & Tibi, 2018). Parents also increased their comfort levels with their own reading abilities. At first, it was observed that the child often assumed the leadership role regarding reading, and over time, parents transitioned into leadership roles more frequently, reiterating their increase in self-efficacy. Our findings also revealed that families' native languages played a significant role in the conversations these mothers and their young children held. This is consistent with previous studies by Authors (2021) and Anderson et al. (2017). They found that despite not being fluent in English, families' native languages became a special tool in fostering book reading interactions with their preschoolers while simultaneously boosting development in these languages. Thus, Vygotsky's sociocultural theory informed the research regarding families' socially constructed learning processes, with respect to cultural contexts where bilingualism played an important role in fostering English language learning while maintaining the native languages.

### Incorporating Shared Book Reading Strategies

Over time, we observed that all four mothers implemented book reading strategies previously introduced by the researchers. Therefore, by the end of the study, mothers and their young children were observed to be spending more time pointing and having conversations about the books

**Table 1** Shared book reading strategies used

Types of comments/questions	Tara	Pemala	Naiing	Nu Chewa
Asking child to complete sentences or number counting	She also encouraged her son to count objects in the book, and most often, the child comfortably counted to ten	Pemala would prompt her son to finish her sentence, sometimes including a question for guidance: "the frog is.... Where? Where is frog?"	She encouraged him to stay focused by asking him to count, talk about the pictures, discuss the subject material, and identify characters and settings	Nu Chewa asked her daughter to complete words they came across in the book
Asking open-ended questions	Tara asked more complex questions that prompted the child to stay more focused on the story content like "what are the characters doing?"	Pemala sustained dialogues when she prompted the child to add details to his responses. She would ask most questions in her home language	Naiing asked, "where is frog? Can you see frog?" Her son responded by pointing to the frog. She then asked, "Is it a girl or boy?", followed by the comment "oh, he is jumping."	She asked questions about the pictures and the story, demonstrating her question-asking skills throughout sessions. The book-reading sessions were highly collaborative. She also asked the child to talk about what the characters were doing
Asking the Wh-questions	Although most of the questions asked were close ended, like "What is that?" and "What color is that?" She used these more complex questions to scaffold the children and open up opportunities for more discussions about the book like, "Where do they live?"	She asked simple questions about colors, content, and counting. While pointing at the book she was observed asking questions like "what is this color?", "What sound does the cat make?", "how many are these?", "what sound does a dog make?", "what sound does a bird make?", "how does a snake move?"	She asked, "What is this?" and provided choice questions: "Does mommy love the giraffe a lot or a little?" She also asked, "Where is the moon?"	Mother and child read, as child leads: "What do you see? I think I can see a lion chasing after me"  She would frequently ask questions like "what is this?", "what color is this?" and "what do you see?"  She asked questions —where is the bear? What is it saying? Daughter responds they were saying good-night "What color? Red?"
Asking questions that relate to real life experiences	Tara connected different characters or pictures in the books with her children's real-life experiences with animals	Pemala said, "clap your hand, clap your hand," her son mirrored this by saying and demonstrating, "Clap your hand."  She also encouraged him to mimic her pronunciation of words ("library"), or behaviors based on what was happening in the story	"Have you ever seen the moon?" "Do you like moon?" "Elephant did good in the library; read books like [son's name], everybody listen to elephant." She added, "elephant very good job— elephant listens, pay attention to the teacher, everybody love elephant." Naiing highlighted the importance of real-life rules like paying attention to the teacher and the value of reading with others	Mother: "Where is the bear? What is it saying?" Daughter responds "They are saying goodnight."



**Table 1** (continued)

Types of comments/questions	Tara	Pemala	Naing	Nu Chewa
Pointing/ Tracking	They worked together to choose books by pointing. Tara navigated new books apprehensively but managed to co-lead the experience with her children primarily pointing at words and discussing the pictures	She was observed pointing at words and pictures in the book while reading with her child. While pointing at a frog picture, her son counted along to respond, "1-4, four legs."	Naing used pointing to draw attention to counting, discussing pictures, and often commented on the story to describe pictures and what was happening	When Nu Chewa encountered large sections of text that she could not read, she discussed the pictures with the child while pointing at the picture. She and the older daughter read together with both pointing to the words in the book and sounding them out in English
Repeating and expanding on what the child says	She regularly repeated the children's words and acknowledged their responses	Pemala seemed to prioritize learning how to read words before discussing the story's meaning. She would repeat words in the story like "see" and "yellow" and prompt her son to	She was skilled at scaffolding his learning – directing his attention to count again when he made a mistake – "Look closely, is it one or two?". Her son looked more closely and responded "two."	Nu Chewa after reading, "I took my elephant to the library," pointed at the elephant's eye and asked, "... what is this?" and the younger daughter replied, "elephant." Nu Chewa expanded by saying, "elephant eye."
Sounding out new words	Tara was fully engaged in the process and patiently guided her children as they explored the words and pictures page by page	For her son, she would pause in between phrases to give him time to practice. She intentionally allowed the child to practice new words (e.g., scared, library). When she read the words, she paused until her child repeated them	Naing helped her son to pronounce the word 'cat' more accurately in English. She stated, "can you say 'cat'? 'Ca' 'ca' 'cat'". Her son then repeated the word more accurately "cat."	She encouraged her daughter by pointing to the new words and providing the sound of the word as a hint. For instance, when her daughter read whoosh as splash, she started sounding out the "whoosh" and led her to complete the word "whoosh"

**Table 2** Language dynamics within communication

Tara	Tara was joined by her two children (her three-year-old son and five-year-old daughter) during the book-reading sessions. Communication between Tara and her children was multifaceted. The son did not speak his mother's native language, but he understood it and responded in English to comments or questions she posed in Burmese/Karenni. Sometimes we observed them take turns translating unknown words from Karenni to Burmese and then to English. Tara would sometimes ask "what is this word?" to the researchers or the translator. This language dynamic did not present any issues, but instead, it seemed to enrich their conversation as they both read comfortably and carried out discussions in their two primary languages interchangeably, patiently working on learning new words. Although the mother stated that her difficulty reading English was a challenge, she appreciated both her son's and daughter's roles in leading the reading as she learned from them. When her daughter was independently reading, Tara learned her son's finger-tracking cues to follow the story and verbally interacted with him as they read along
Pemala	Pemala was joined by her 4-year-old son during each of the observations. She and her son worked as a team to read, try out new strategies, and learn new words. Pemala expressed that she was learning English by listening to her son speak it. Throughout the phases, they switched between English and their native language to navigate this new challenge of shared book-reading. Her son provided English words that he knew to fill the gaps as needed during the reading sessions. He was very verbal and helped guide discussions by directing his mother to sections of the book and discussing what he saw. She often switched between English and Karen, her native language, when talking to her son to clarify what she wanted to ask or discuss about the book. Her efforts to engage her child in conversations was noticeable when she prompted him to talk more about the pictures and animals in the book. Likewise, Pemala seemed to eventually feel comfortable asking the team members in the room how to pronounce more difficult words like "catalogue" and "pouch." She would repeat these words and redirect her attention to her son and the book activity
Naing	Naing was joined by her son as they participated in shared book-reading. Naing expressed that she had difficulty with English words, so she occasionally relied on her husband to guide the book-reading interaction, particularly during the first session. She comfortably spoke in Karenni when she asked questions that her son did not initially understand. During the second observation, she mostly used Karenni to explain what was happening in the book. While Naing prioritized using English for reading, asking book-related questions, and commenting, she occasionally spoke to her son and husband in their home language. Around the second and third reading sessions Naing read well in English and was able to capture most words accurately. She was able to comprehend the storyline accurately as seen in the questions she asked of her son. Naing shared how she prioritized stocking up on animal-related theme books because her son liked animals and that this would help spark her son's interest in reading. She stated in the interview "he really liked dinosaurs. He tried to learn different kind of a dinosaur name. But it is very difficult to name. But there are many different type of dinosaur!"
Nu Chewa	Nu Chewa was joined by her two daughters during audio and video recording sessions. The older daughter (a first grader) and the younger daughter (4-years of age) sat close to their mother, placing the book on the floor in front of them. They were able to incorporate all three languages while they read. In many instances, Nu Chewa asked her daughters questions in the native language (Karen) and the children switched between their native language and English, moving quite seamlessly between the two languages. Nu Chewa seamlessly spoke to the children in Karen, and some English. For instance, in her native language, she would ask the children what the mother in the picture was doing, to which the children replied, 'hugging'. In Karen, the daughter used complete sentences in her native language to respond and explain to the mother and talk about the character who does not want to go to sleep. There were no moments of confusion when navigating reading in the different languages; instead, they all seemed to adapt well to this communication process

while reading. They pointed at words and pictures in the books to refocus the children's attention. This is consistent with previous studies which explored refugee mothers reading with their young children and concluded that pointing while reading with young children is a highly effective practice, as this promotes children's attention and focus on the story (Authors, 2021; Evans et al., 2008). Mothers and their preschoolers also practiced sounding out familiar alphabet letters aloud while reading some known words and paying specific attention to phonetics. They asked children questions about the words and provided detailed descriptions based on the words in the book. This enabled the children to learn to relate words to the pictures in the story. Reading aloud and spelling words helps young children learn the words and contribute to their vocabulary development (Bojczyk et al., 2016; Evans et al., 2008).

A common strategy that each mother previously engaged in was asking simple questions about pictures and words. This was often preceded by briefly commenting on the

book content while pausing on each page. With the introduction of shared book reading strategies, mothers engaged more in scaffolding by asking open-ended questions. Asking young children open-ended questions helps promote literacy and leads them to engage in thinking while having in-depth conversations (Authors, 2021; Simsek & Erdogan, 2015). Moreover, as adults ask questions, children also learn how to ask questions; the back-and-forth question-answer engagement contributes to story comprehension. The young children and their mothers experienced new learning in their natural environments using this reading strategy. According to Scrimsher and Tudge (2003), Vygotsky's sociocultural theory of development recognizes this dual process whereby learning takes place among individuals as they interact and learn together. In the final phase of our study, we observed that when families were provided with an unfamiliar book to read, one of the mothers stayed engaged with her daughter and successfully read through all pages. The mother demonstrated confidence in asking action-oriented questions

that challenged her daughters at a higher level while both demonstrated increased turn-taking while reading together. Likewise, as with the other mothers, this relationship was observed where the young children learned to ask questions and repeat words modeled by adults as they read together. Consistent with other studies conducted with refugees, (Authors, 2021; Perry, 2009, 2014; Quadros & Sarroub, 2016; Saracho, 2000) children's literacy seemed to improve when adults not only waited for children to respond to questions but allowed them to ask their own questions.

Reading for most of the families became a fun experience. Tara and her child were physically and emotionally close as they enjoyed reading together. As mothers gained more confidence, they began to hold lengthy conversations in the reading process. In their work, Luo et al. (2014) note that reading in this manner provides an opportunity for rich and varied conversations and promotes interaction and dialogue beyond the story. Mothers engaged their young children in describing pictures and talking about the characters in books, making the reading experience exciting and at the same time, improving children's reading skills. Tara shared that her son had improved his reading skills and developed an excitement for reading. She further indicated that she had introduced reading books as a new activity that they both enjoyed and found that her son started spending less time with toys. All the mothers shared this sentiment.

Pemela indicated that she had introduced reading books as a new activity and found that her son started spending less time with toys. All the mothers were found to share this sentiment; with Nu Chewa indicating that she had started reading with her child for 10 to 20 min every day, while Naing indicated that when she read with her child, they were more relaxed and had fun reading, laughing about the pictures and characters in the story. Reading with young children is a fun experience that allows them to enjoy reading, which is an ingredient for boosting literacy development. Hammer and Sawyer (2016) note that reading should be fun as it encourages the child to retell the story and make meaning of it, thus contributing to the child's interest and ability in reading.

Additionally, these families demonstrated how the role of the 'more knowledgeable other' was interchangeable between the mother and child (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 84). In one instance, an incorrect answer from her child led the mother to provide clues and ask clarifying questions. She seemed to know intuitively how to scaffold the process to promote learning for her son. Bodrova (1997) describes the Zone of Proximal Development as the zone where a more knowledgeable individual helps the child learn new information beyond what they already know. However, in this study the child was observed occasionally "teaching" the mother words that she did not know. For example, the translator shared in each observation when Tara was asking her child what an English word meant in Karenni. Furthermore, the

sociocultural theory highlights the importance of culture in shaping how scaffolding during book reading occurs (Miller, 2016). Scaffolding of book reading related skills visibly increased over time for one mother, as was evident when she began to use strategies such as rephrasing the question, shortening the question, or speaking in Karenni (native language) to help the child understand better. This indicates that the Burmese mothers' cultural linguistic backgrounds played an important role in how they read with their young children, specifically regarding language and communication. Singh and colleagues (2015) acknowledged that teaching and learning involve social and cultural processes that help break down cultural and linguistic barriers. The mothers learned how to incorporate the new literacy practices with their cultural practices and language through scaffolding, which will likely help assimilate their young children into the U.S. education system.

### Language Dynamics Within Communication

Mothers and their preschoolers navigated multiple languages to communicate and learn together. Most of the children understood English and could speak and attempt reading at their own level. Comparatively, the mothers were learning English as a second or even third language and needed extra support. While these families interacted with the books, they utilized their native language(s) and English when asking questions, talking about words, and describing book content. Consistent with findings from their family literacy program for Burmese refugee families, Singh et al. (2015) found that language was a challenge to most families, but despite their linguistic challenges, parents became active participants and 'teachers' as they mutually navigated through the linguistic and cultural barriers with the books (Authors, 2021; Friedrich et al., 2014). Additionally, in their study with Spanish speaking families, Wessels and Trainin (2023) concluded that families navigated the bilingual landscape using dual language books and their native languages. This is a tool that multilingual families possess and use to help their young children learn. The use of the native language during reading was clear for these families as mothers scaffolded their young children. Authors (2021) posit that, although parents may see their limited English proficiency as a sign of weakness, concerted efforts should be made to ensure them of the richness of such languages and not viewed as a barrier when supporting their children's literacy.

Although the preschoolers did not always understand questions asked in their native language, they followed their mothers' cues, such as pointing, to carry on the conversation. Tara and other mothers shared aspirations about helping their young children learn how to read, write, and gain life skills in the initial interviews despite not yet feeling confident in their skills. Past research on dual language speakers

has pointed to the benefits of families' home languages in boosting children and parents' second language learning (Authors, 2021; Friedrich et al., 2014; Grøver et al., 2020; Perry, 2009; Wissman, 2018).

## Implications

We can promote literacy among refugee families by strengthening their existing skills and providing culturally responsive support. First, early childhood professionals should emphasize that families can read in a way or space that is appropriate for them. The mothers in this study tended to bring their family to a cozy space in their home and read together on the floor, which likely made them feel more comfortable enjoying the shared book reading experience. Likewise, early childhood education professionals working with multilingual refugee learners may benefit from introducing dual language books and shared book reading strategies. Families can use guidance on recommended books and where to find them. In these communications with refugee families, teachers may find it helpful to relay more tips and strategies on how to read with young children in their preferred home language. Access to dual language books paired with instructions written in parents' preferred languages proves a suitable method of introducing reading to refugee families that may not have had much access to print text in the past. Reading in their language allowed families to keep ties to their native language as they learn English, an aspect that should be encouraged. Our findings suggest that further evaluation of strategies for reading that work for refugees could be helpful in curating literacy materials with instructions, tips, and strategies. This will help standardize support for these families.

## Limitations and Further Research Directions

A major limitation for this study was the absence of the fathers. We believe that having fathers in the study would have benefited the families more, as having both parents learn different ways of reading with young children allows them to have the same experiences with both parents and boosts literacy for the whole family. Additionally, the role of siblings and their contributions to shared book reading experiences play a major part in supporting literacy among their younger siblings. Despite this knowledge, this was a limitation in our study as we did not code for sibling interactions. Further research could focus on the role that siblings and other family members play in shared book reading. In our study, we noticed two of the mother-child dyads were occasionally joined by other family members and although we did not look at what impact this may have had on the reading process, this is a context that needs to be studied.

Another element that other studies could investigate is the use of multiple languages and code switching. In our study, we noted that mothers sometimes used their native languages during book interactions. However, due to the complexity of the different languages and dialects that the mothers and some of their young children used, we were not able to focus on this aspect despite knowing that those conversations might have been critical to our study.

We acknowledge that every refugee community is different and so are their needs. Therefore, although the findings of this study may be used to inform similar work with other refugee populations, these findings were specific to a sub-sample of four Burmese mothers and cannot be generalized to other Burmese families and refugees in general. New research should include various refugee groups with different cultural backgrounds to address variability in literacy experiences that are nationally representative.

## Conclusion

Guided by our research questions, our analysis and interpretations demonstrated that Burmese mothers and their preschoolers worked together to engage in shared book reading experiences playfully and strategically over time, and the families incorporated core strategies of shared book reading in their home-based interactions. Through observations and conversations, these refugee families clearly have the skills and motivation to enhance their language and literacy practices within their homes. Mothers and the young children in this study were comfortable employing book reading strategies, especially scaffolding and extratextual talk. The preschoolers were attentive and excited, as seen through their high engagement and leadership behaviors. The dual language books allowed mother-child conversations in their native language(s) and English. Likewise, mothers capitalized on communicating more efficiently with their young children in their native language to clarify questions and thoughts about the book. Findings for these questions highlight the need for continued discussions on developing literacy-related resources and interventions to support these families and the schools that work with these young children.

## Appendix 1

### Burmese Mothers

#### Tara

Tara is originally from Burma. At the time of this study, she had lived in the United States for nine years. She lives with

nine family members in their home, including her husband, six children, and her in-laws. Tara did not have the opportunity for formal education as a child and only completed kindergarten and stopped attending school due to financial constraints. While in Burma, she worked on the farm to support her family. She speaks three languages (Kaya, Karenni, and Burmese) and is also learning English. While the children understand Karenni, they prefer to speak English. Tara can read and write some words in Burmese, but she disclosed that she is not very confident in these abilities. She received an informal education in the refugee camps where she grew up and learned how to speak Karenni. She believes she can learn more by attending school and accessing books through the library, and by actively seeking new resources to help her family learn. Tara was joined by her two children (her 3-year-old son and 5-year-old daughter) during the book-reading sessions.

### **Pemela**

Originally from Burma, Pemela lived in Thailand as a refugee for 10 years before moving and settling in the southeastern United States in 2013. She shared that she did not have the privilege of attending school in her home country but attended some schooling while living as a refugee in Thailand. During her first few years in the U.S., she worked in a chicken factory but now stays home to care for the family. She currently lives with her husband and their 4-year-old son. They speak Karenni at home, and although she has limited English language skills, her son is learning English well and helps teach her. Pemela was joined by her 4-year-old son during each of the observations.

### **Naing**

At the time of this project, Naing had lived in the United States for four years. Before moving to the United States, she lived in Burma and later at a refugee camp in Thailand, where she spent time volunteering. She lives with her husband and their two sons, who speak Karenni and Burmese. Her oldest son is 7 years old and the youngest is 4 years old; born in Thailand and the United States respectively. Naing has approximately ten years of education and earned a high school and college diplomas before coming to the United States. She is moderately comfortable speaking and reading English but does not feel confident in pronouncing new words. She and her husband started taking citizenship classes after they settled in the United States and are working to support their son to learn how to read. Naing balances her role of being a mother and supporting her child to prepare for school while assisting other members of her community and thus her enthusiasm to be fluent in English.

Naing was joined by her son as they participated in shared book-reading.

### **Nu Chewa**

Originally from Burma, Nu Chewa and her family moved to Malaysia, where they lived in a refugee camp before coming to the United States. Growing up, she was a farmer with no opportunity for an education. After moving to the U.S., Nu Chewa settled in the southeast, where she has lived for four and a half years with her husband and their two daughters, ages 4 and 7. She speaks Burmese and Karenni but can neither write nor read in either of the languages. Nu Chewa has high hopes for her children and spends time helping them learn the alphabet despite challenges with limited skills in the English language. She also supports her children access learning resources available in her community. Her daily life consists primarily of taking care of her children, doing house chores, and attending English language classes. Nu Chewa was joined by her two daughters during audio and video recording sessions.

## **Appendix 2**

### **Comfort and engagement**

The findings below reflect on the experiences of each of the mothers.

#### **Tara**

Initially, She was not very comfortable with reading, especially in English. She voiced anxious thoughts that she was not prepared or qualified to teach her children to read English “the right way.” She trusted her son and daughter to do most of the reading and was very comfortable interacting with the son in their native language. For the most part, Tara’s son took control of the shared book-reading experience and exhibited confidence in his abilities to identify characters, colors, and descriptions of the pictures. Her son used descriptive words like “a big one” and “a little one” and used language to describe what was going on in the book. Unlike his mother, the child quickly connected with real-life experiences. For example, when he saw pictures of stars in the book, he said, “we sleep, close our eyes,” and “the animals are playing. They are not goodnight yet,” meaning that he could connect actions and activities associated with nighttime. The child described everything in the book, telling the whole story, and was not distracted by conversations around him. He was observed saying things like, “The fish are trying to swim in the pool...I see a little one, big one, this is goldfish.” He counted the goldfish up to six and added

conversations like, “This is crab...he wants to eat this one... this is a starfish.” Tara indicated that she was learning from the child because she did not know how to read. Their conversations mostly centered around characters and colors, and while the child “read,” the mother followed, occasionally conversing in Kaya or Karenni while her son spoke English.

### Pemela

While Pemela expressed some hesitation with her ability to read and talk about the book, she remained patient. Over time, her confidence seemed to increase, as there was less discussion about inabilities and more conversation about actual practices. This growth in confidence and discussion on progress rather than inabilities demonstrates some strides in her developing confidence. Pemela’s son was consistently an active participant in the book-reading activities. He showed much interest in talking about the books and enjoyed acting out different animal sounds and movements. He took control of the book-reading when he was familiar with the books, flipping through pages, pointing, and seemed to learn the subject material quickly after reading the book. He was also able to memorize parts of his favorite books. Both Pemela and her son were comfortable reading together and spending time looking at the books together.

### Naing

In the second half of phase two, Naing asked, “Is this, okay?” to know if she was conducting the reading session correctly. She shared that her son was also not skilled in English pronunciation, and he preferred to read in their home language. Her son often helped lead the book-reading activities by choosing which book to read, flipping pages, and pointing. When he found a preferred book, he demonstrated this to Naing by holding the book and saying, “Mama, look.” With time, Naing started to exhibit more confidence by facilitating the shared book-reading activity from start to finish, while integrating a variety of shared book-reading strategies to engage her son. During the fourth phase with the unfamiliar book, Naing started reading more confidently and occasionally highlighted essential details in the story. When she asked questions, he was responsive; he would point to pictures in response to questions about the content of the pictures on the page. He would also nod in response to questions from his mother. Sometimes, he was able to label animals (e.g., “giraffe”) verbally and use adjectives to describe the animals (e.g., “long neck”) to describe the giraffe.

### Nu Chewa

Expressed that she worried about her inability to pronounce words correctly, “I cannot pronounce well the words at this

time.” As Nu Chewa and the children read together in the second phase, she shared that “[I] did not know what [I] was reading” and “It is still difficult to make the sounds up.” The older daughter took the lead in reading in the second half of phase two, while Nu Chewa was usually the one to ask questions. By the third and fourth phases, Nu Chewa was reading more smoothly in English and had gained confidence in her reading skills. Nu Chewa asked questions confidently, and the younger child was eager to answer. They could sustain their attention on reading in both sessions and seemed very engaged. While Nu Chewa mentioned that she was not entirely comfortable with the English language and felt like she had a lot to learn, by phase four, she was confident in her ability to achieve those goals. She had no problem with leading her children in the book-reading process. She took time to learn from the oldest daughter as well. She was also able to help her daughter as she read and at the same time, watch and help her younger daughter focus on what was being read. The family’s ambiance indicated fun learning in an informal setting. By phase four, the children laughed about their answers and shared jokes with the mother.

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**Conflict of interest** The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

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