

## Gaining Proficiency in First Additional Language: Language Learning as Social Practice

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**ABSTRACT** The study of First additional language learning seeks to investigate the role of L1 towards proficiency in FAL. Many studies explored that a good knowledge of L1 can ease the proficiency in the additional language. English, though FAL is the language of learning and teaching in most South African schools so there is need for a level of proficiency in this language for the learners to excel academically. The study is interpretive in nature based on a case study because the researchers aspire to get an in-depth understanding. In view of this, the qualitative design is considered as ideal. The study came up with the main finding that a good knowledge of L1 can ease competence in L2. It concludes that the easier way to learn a language is through interaction in that given language.

### INTRODUCTION

The systematic study of how individuals acquire a second or additional language emerged during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, apparently due to demands of globalisation, career advancement and education (Cook 1996: 1; Ellis 1997: 3). Such studies have observed how people's L1 may facilitate or hinder their learning of second languages, as well as the strategies they may use to learn languages (Cook 1996: 7; Ellis 1997: 85). However, for anyone to become proficient or competent in an additional language, one needs to acquire some basic skills through varying strategies and skills.

The Department of Basic Education (DoBE) (2010: 3), defines language proficiency as "the level of competence at which the individual is able to use a language for both basic communication tasks and academic tasks". English is the language of learning and teaching (LoLT) in most South African schools. It means learners are given instructions and explanations of how to complete academic tasks in English. As such, there is the possibility of the learners experiencing limited English language proficiency as various scholars have found such limitation among African learners or students and teachers (Monyai 2010). Even in cases where some learners are able to listen and speak English, they still encounter problems with writing. It is needful to indicate that one of the skills needed for teaching and learning is writing because all assessments and examinations are conducted through this skill.

Elder (2001) defines that the language proficiency required by educators as language skills

that encompass everything that normal language users might be expected to do in the context of both formal and informal communication. Such proficiency includes a range of specialist skills such as expert command of the linguistic features of the medium of instruction (Short 2002), command of subject specific language and terminology (Elder 2001) and knowledge about second language acquisition (Schleppegrell 2004). Arua and Magocha (2002) define proficiency as the use of fluent speech in such a way that it effectively conveys intended meanings or messages. It encompasses the notions of grammatical correctness and communicative competence, while taking into account the different levels of language development of learners. The South African National Curriculum defines language proficiency in terms of the learner's skills and abilities to:

- ♦ Make and negotiate meanings,
- ♦ Show critical awareness of language use,
- ♦ Understand, know, apply language structures and conventions in appropriate contexts and use appropriate communication strategies for specific purposes (South Africa National Curriculum 1997).

In fact, it indicates to what extent skills and knowledge have been acquired by learners in the teaching and learning of that particular language. It involves the ability to use appropriate grammatical structures, to construct meaningful and comprehensive utterances depending on the demand of the situation. Its testing involves a reliable way of testing in measuring the learners' language competence and performance.

The prime focus of the paper is writing skills, because writing "is a powerful instrument of

communication that allows learners to construct and communicate thoughts and ideas coherently" (DoBE 2011b: 11). It also "forces learners to think about grammar and spelling" (DoBE (2011b: 11). Canale and Swain (2002) refer to these performances as communicative and grammatical competencies. They further state that communicative competence incorporates grammatical competence. Learners' transactional writing, for example letters, recipes and essays (DoBE 2011b) can be a good reflection of this competence.

Based on the importance of writing competence, Probyn (2006) argues that in regions where the language of teaching and learning (LoLT) is the language of a former colonial power, the teachers and learners tend to be unable to stick to the LoLT but may also use their L1 so much that the lessons may tend to be bilingual. Monyai (2010: 1-2) reports that primary school learners who are not proficient in English (First Additional Language) have difficulties in coping with academic requirements, and they struggle to execute specific learning activities. Hence, Government expects teachers to assist learners with limited English leaning proficiency (LEP) (DoBE 2011a: 8; DoBE 2011b: 93). The problem that arises is that first additional language learners cannot express themselves appropriately in English (Monyai 2010; Probyn 2006).

As mentioned earlier, the focus of the paper is on writing proficiency motivated by DoBE's (2011b: 11) position that writing "is a powerful instrument of communication that allows learners to construct and communicate thoughts and ideas coherently", and it "forces learners to think about grammar and spelling". Archibald (2014) accepted that writing proficiency in English first additional language makes learner's members of fluent English discourse communities.

### Research Question

Through what processes do learners learn writing in their First additional language?

### Literature Review

The theoretical framework for the study is the cognitivist-constructivism of Macaro (2003: 21). In this view, both cognitivists and constructivists view learning as a cognitive process, but cognitivists see age category as the main factor for cognitive development, while the social en-

vironment is the main factor for the constructivists (Huitt and Hummel 2003). Thus, for cognitivists, the learners' proficiency can only improve as they grow older, while with constructivists the learners' interaction with their social environment is very important. It is significant to add that numerous cognitivists have adopted a more constructivist approach and that the constructivist theory is rooted in Jean Piaget's cognitivism.

Piggin (2012) submits that the notion of language proficiency is elusive since proficiency in this regard is associated more with "ability", "success", as well as "accuracy" (Macaro 2003: 220-221). Macaro (2003) further points out that these terms, particularly 'accuracy' need further clarity. Macaro then gives possible definitions of writing proficiency as "being able to put across content (the information we wish to communicate) coherently and cohesively so that an intended reader (audience) can understand without extra effort" otherwise known as producing writing that is accurate. This definition is unsure if a FAL speaker's (or writer's) accuracy is the same as the L1 speaker's (or writers). The term proficiency then becomes ambivalent to this effect.

In line with the cognitivist-constructivist theoretical framework, Macaro (2003) and Shastri (2010) suggest that beginner and lower intermediate phase learners be taught writing from a progression of simple to hard tasks. They suggest that descriptive and narrative writing are the simplest tasks, and the expository/explanatory/argumentative task is one of the most complexes which require higher order thinking and analytical skills. Macaro (2003) further brings in justifiable evidence showing that providing learners with writing frames or prompts helps to improve learners' performance. DoBE (2011b: 11) refers to the writing frames as scaffolding which can help to produce "competent, versatile writers who can be able to use their skills to develop and present appropriate written, visual and multi-media texts for a variety of purposes". It is useful at this juncture to note that writing as stated earlier by Macaro (2003) is a process, not a product. There is a lot of learning, practice and support that need to take place for proficiency to be gained. In line with the constructivist perspective, it is therefore easier for an L1 speaker to gain proficiency in writing than a FAL learner because the L1 learner is exposed to the language more than the FAL learner does.

On the other hand, the Cognitive theory observes learning as an active and systematic mental process (Macaro 2003). Thus, true to the nature of human beings, children are curious and active in the quest for knowledge (McLeod 2007). Macaro (2003: 30) also states that the cognitive approach to learning, including second language learning, “stresses the notion that the individual is *active, constructive and planful*”. Thus, acquiring a first additional language and communicating through it, may involve mental processes (Macaro 2003: 30) as the ‘what if’ question. However, as much as children are active in their learning, much of that learning, according to Vygotsky’s (1976) occurs when they are assisted by those with more knowledge. In practice therefore, teachers, older siblings, friends, parents to name a few, should purposely and systematically help English L2 learners to improve their proficiency in the language.

In terms of the above argument, Pearson Education (1995, 2010) confirms that cognitivism “has been influential in the constructivist models of learning”. This is because the more experienced others that are enumerated above form part of the agency. In other words, the environment and its occupants provide affordances for language learning. The study refers to the agencies as affordances because they simply facilitate the learning without being part of it (Foncha 2013). Thus, cognition and construction; the theoretical framework for this study makes a good blend for understanding writing. In view of the above, the cognitivist-constructivist theory implies that the learners that are on the one hand taught at a level or by methods that do not enable them to use their cognitive and be motivated to know, and on the other hand not supported by experienced second language users.

Regarding language proficiency, Bachman (1990) believes that the term “language proficiency” has been used to refer in general to knowledge, competence, or ability in the use of a language, irrespective of how, where, or under what conditions it is acquired. Bachman (1990) states that language proficiency is essentially synonymous to language ability or ability of language use. Bachman (1990) further argues that language proficiency is not a single unitary ability, but it consists of several distinct but related constructs. In this regard, Farhady et al. (1994) state that a language learner can either be a listener, speaker or both at a given point in time.

In this regard, Cummins (2003) proposes two dimensions of language proficiency which are cognitive/academic language ability (CALP) and basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS). He explains CALP as the dimension of language proficiency strongly related to cognitive and academic skills or general intelligence. Such skills develop in a formal classroom situation while BICS as the basic skill required for oral fluency as well as sociolinguistic aspects of competence developed naturally. Venzke (2002) emphasizes that BICS allow learners to converse fluently in demanding natural situations. The context in which conversation is held provides a great deal of information about the meaning of what is said.

On the other hand, Wright (2000) suggests that CALP enables learners to understand academic concepts and to perform higher cognitive operations required of a person at school or institution of higher learning. However, Venzke (2002) argues that one should be careful not to judge the learners’ proficiency in L2 upon their proficiency in BICS because learners sometimes are able to express themselves well in English in natural settings, but still perform very poorly academically. Deficiency in cognitive abilities or poor motivation could be blamed for poor academic performance when the learner has not yet developed adequate levels of CALP to cope with academic work.

In fact, a learner becomes literate and proficient in the national and international languages as this will enable them to participate meaningfully in the social and political lives of their societies. Proficiency in national and international languages can have significant labour market returns as Ashcraft (2006) argues that the traditional rationale for using English medium instruction in higher education in non-native contexts is that textbooks and journals in most fields are published in English which leads to good career jobs. Proficiency in English can enable learners to compete in the global job market that, in turn, might help the economy of the country.

The drive from the mother tongue education to the ever pressing need to be able to use international languages such as English has been an unsolved issue for many countries including South Africa (Baker 2006). Problems with writing emanate when a person has to think in one language and communicate ideas in another language. Nevertheless, Benson (2008) argues that

in cases where English is seen as a barrier to teaching and learning, literacy in local languages (home language) may act as a bridge to literacy in other languages including English. In fact, mastering of literacy in local languages can help a child to develop literacy in English at a later stage. Further, Coleman's (2006) points to the fact that a lack of sufficient preparation prior to the implementation of such extensive language policy reforms can be detrimental to the quality of education. In this case, learners are asked to learn subjects such as science and mathematics through English when their English proficiency is not sufficiently developed, thus leading to failure. Not only does this lead to tragic personal consequences for children and families, but also represents waste on a national scale. In view of this, Coetzee (2004) posits that it is a key reason for delaying the use of English in schools until children have developed literacy in their local languages (mother tongue) and also it should centre on the issue of resources, both human and material. An advantage for delaying the teaching of English until learners are more mature is that the learners might have a better notion of why they are learning English. At present, there are, literally, millions of young primary learners across the world being forced to learn English, and often taught by educators whose own English proficiency is inadequate for the task, as well as those who have no need or opportunity to use the language outside the classroom. Hence, it is not surprising that so many of these learners end up as failures in the English language. In this regard, it is worth allowing them to learn English once they are more mature and confident in their own identities and cultures. That is when they can be able to understand that English is the international language of communication and worth learning. On the other hand, Baker (2006) argues that delaying the use of English as medium of instruction can also be delaying the availability of reasonable and relevant resources that can be easily developed. This is to suggest an earlier perspective that L1 learners are likely to be more proficient in a language than FAL learners. Thus, exposing learners to a language much earlier in their lives can help to expose them to the language and broaden their proficiency in it since they have the opportunity to interact with it.

Countries like China, Vietnam, and the former Soviet Union have practiced the communist ide-

al of providing local language instruction to promote comradeship and equality between groups, and while this has not necessarily resulted in equal distribution of educational resources it has supported a great deal of enabling legislation (Kosonen 2004). The Six-Year Yoruba Medium Primary Project, in the findings of North American studies (Thomas and Collier 2002) and the experience of many European countries, suggest that a language foreign to the learner should be taught as a subject for five to seven years prior to being used to teach academic content. This would mean focusing on the mother tongue throughout primary schooling and using appropriate methodology to teach other languages as subjects, a model that is not yet being practiced in multilingual countries. Alidou (2006) supports this with evidence from various countries such as Tanzania and Zambia which highlights that educational progress can be impeded by English medium of instruction on EFAL learners and that skills may be insufficiently developed to serve as an effective educational medium. Baker (2006) and Benson (2011) both suggest that the medium of instruction is the most powerful means of maintaining and revitalizing a language and a culture as it is also the most important form of intergenerational transmission. Chumbow (2012) agrees with both researchers as he sees the language of teaching and learning as the direct agent of linguistic genocide. Medium of instruction determines which social and linguistic groups have access to political and economic opportunities, and which groups are disenfranchised (Chumbow 2012). It is therefore a key means of power (re)distribution and social (re) construction, as well as a key arena in which political conflicts among countries and ethno linguistic, social and political groups are realized.

Based on this, Chaudron (1998) holds that in a situation where the learner learns through a language other than the mother tongue, he faces problems because his task is three-fold:

- ♦ Firstly, the learner has to make sense of the instructional tasks, which are presented in the first additional language.
- ♦ Secondly, he has to attain linguistic competence that is required for effective learning to take place.
- ♦ And finally, he has to master the content itself.

In fact, a poor grasp of FAL can result in a feeling of incompetence and loss of confidence

on the part of the learner (Roy-Campbell 1996). In the context of benefits of mother tongue as the medium of education, Cummins' (1974) views on cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP) is relevant. CALP requires sound literacy skills and a broad vocabulary in mother tongue in order to facilitate subject-matter mastery, concept development and skills in formal oral and written expression in the FAL. In fact, first language acquisition must develop strongly in the early years to achieve success in cognitive functioning.

On the other hand, Varkuti (2009) and Mackey (2005) highlight that the use of mother tongue as a medium of instruction in primary school can lead to lower proficiency in national and/or international languages which are often the language of instruction in higher education. This suggests that the non-availability of the developed written forms of the MT languages militates against the language being the medium of instruction. Though mother tongue can be used effectively between a learner and a teacher, it can however not be functional if undeveloped in an academic or scholarly context. This therefore suggests that when a language lacks a well-established written form, it cannot be empowered which in turn can jeopardize the potential status of such language.

To bring a little clarity, Moss and Puma (2000) observe that second language learners who attend former model C schools receive lower grades and are judged by their teachers to have lower academic abilities and score below their classmates (who are native speakers of English) on standardized tests. As pointed out by Ashcraft (2006), content-area educators in all subjects are affected by English medium of instruction because they face the challenge of teaching their subjects in English to learners who are not proficient enough to follow the lesson. Some of these educators may feel frustrated because in addition to their academic fields, they have to cope with language issues in their classrooms which demands extra knowledge and skills regarding second language acquisition processes (Westergaard 2003). Thus, Hellekjaer and Westergaard (2003) suggests that English medium of instruction in non-English speaking countries constrains content area teaching methods. Since English is a second language for some educators, some may not be confident or qualified enough to teach in English. Administrative staff

is also affected by the English-medium instruction because some of them may not have a good command of English to carry out their jobs (Ashcraft 2006). If the staff have problems to communicate in English, it is difficult for the school to create an ideal inclusive and conducive working climate.

Nel and Muller (2010) found lower proficient students to be more externally oriented than higher proficient students. Archibald (2014) discussed how individuals who are proficient-oriented are motivated to pursue challenging goals and attain high levels of performance in competitive situations. Proficient-orientated individuals were found to actively seek activities that afford self-evaluation and feedback and they value competence (Archibald 2014). Conversely, the authors showed that people who are low in proficiency are not oriented toward competence. These individuals avoid assessment and competition whenever possible, and are likely to experience performance anxiety (Foncha 213). It is therefore in this regards that the use of mastery goals that emphasize personal improvement and skill development may increase the salience of competence in threatening situations (Archibald 2014).

### ***Factors that Influence Learners Development of Proficiency in EFAL***

Mahlobo (2003) and Kormos and Dornyei (2004) studied the effects of variables like the contribution of parents in their children's L2 acquisition and proficiency and the influence of other variables like the school and classroom environment. The curriculum of the home is characterised by family values that manifest from parent-child interaction. Such values set a foundation of individual responsibility, hard work, perseverance and the importance of education and educational achievement (Mahlobo 2003). The literature review highlights the following parental factors as influential on learner motivation:

- Parents' socio-economic status,
- Parents' level of education, and
- Appropriate family context and culture (Mahlobo 2003).

Some research indicates that there is a significant relationship between parents' socio-economic status and their children's level of intelligence (Mahlobo 2003). Families with low socio-

economic status lack items such as books, magazines, radios, television, TV games, computers and computer games that can serve to stimulate children intellectually and provide exposure to English. However, this can affect the learners' ESL proficiency and academic performance since such learners tend to be characterised by a lack of motivation, poor academic achievement, poor language skills, inductive rather than deductive reasoning, as well as inability to use high order cognitive strategies like analysis, synthesis and evaluation (Du Toit 2003; Mahlobo 2003).

The parents' level of education determines their levels of aspirations for their children, parental involvement in the education of their children and the family value systems. Driessen (2002) observes that children of highly educated parents benefit more from education as their parents are able to assist more in their learning. Such children can make more progress than those who are not fully supported by their parents due to poor educational backgrounds. Parental involvement entails their assistance on high scholastic achievement, offering academic guidance and provision of resources on school related tasks and managing and emphasizing educational activities of their children rather than pleasurable things like TV programmes, choice of books and magazines (Mahlobo 2003: 47). The expression of affection and interest in the child's academic and personal growth, effective value systems, family practices, parental beliefs and attitudes toward education can contribute to motivation and positive self-concept. When parents cannot speak or understand English, the learners' acquisition of English is not supported and reinforced after school hours. Such parents may also feel ill-equipped to assist with homework.

Parents' expectations of scholastic success, a better career, as well as high professional status attainment, are important and easily transmitted through a development of a family context and culture which values education in so far as it leads to self-improvement and high self-esteem (Schnider and Lee 1990). They point out that such a context can be created through, amongst others, verbal encouragement of children to excel in ESL tasks, helping them with English homework and practical projects, monitoring progress in English, rewarding every improvement, offering academic guidance when possible and support from an ESL perspective. Parents should also provide reading materials such as books, newspapers and magazines with

topics of interest to their children. In conclusion, a variety of studies show that a home conducive to learning and a family context which include the parents' level of education, positive educational aspirations and effective involvement in their children's improvement in ESL proficiency, can result in high general scholastic performance. This is a clear indication that education and ESL achievement is not the responsibility of the school alone. For education to succeed, parents should also play a prominent role in the education of their children.

### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A qualitative research method was adopted for the study in order to carry out an in-depth study of English First Additional language proficiency. It focuses on observing actions and reading some pieces of learners' writings that enabled the researchers to study events as they happened and to put meaning to what was being narrated. This research method suggests a case study design because the interest was to examine the use of the language of teaching and learning in classrooms. It is envisaged that the researcher could gain a better understanding of the learners' FAL proficiencies and what strategies may be adopted to improve the learners' language competence. The case was that of one High school in Alice town. Due to the perspectival nature of the study, the interpretivist paradigm was deemed necessary since interpretivism has it that social phenomena are not physical and require interpretation by the research and social actors (Leedy and Ormrod 2005). According to McMillan and Schumacher (2000: 372), in order to understand an individual, a person should understand their level of knowledge, their feelings and actions.

The population consisted of Grade 10, 11 and Grade 12 classrooms. Instrumentation included classroom observation, and the reading and analysis of pieces of writings from 12 learners who were randomly chosen based on their willingness to hand over their essays to the researchers who were also carrying out community engagement in the school.

### OBSERVATIONS AND DISCUSSION

Possel and Zeller (2010) state that language proficiency can result from the ability to use the available stock of grammar to produce an indefinite number of sentences. This definition points

to the lack of English language proficiency which is in view of the researchers' observation of Grade 10, 11 and 12 of one High School in Alice, where learners were unable to elaborate on their Mathematics answers in English, but were able to do so in isiXhosa. In view of this, (Probyn 2006) indicates that township school learners are likely to have limited English proficiency. The cognitivist theory - of Vygotsky - suggests that L2 learners can be fairly proficient in an additional language. This researchers' observation of these classrooms seem to suggest that the lack of proficiency is not only a problem to the learners, but that of the teachers who are not confident or proficient enough to teach other subjects using the medium of instruction (English). As a matter of interest, it is worth mentioning that even English Language teachers teach English in isiXhosa. Even when they attempt to teach in English, the level of code switching into the mother tongue is rampant. In this regard, the problem of proficiency cannot be blamed solely on the learners but rather on the system that does not seem to make any attempt to implement the language policy.

The second instant was that of a Grade 10 learner who asked the class teacher 'what if we were using one language during a Life Orientation lesson.' Incidentally, the learner had asked the same question that was in the researchers' minds. This was quite exciting and the class teacher responded that he/she was code switching so that the learners can understand better. The researchers had the impression that this teacher was not proficient in English and was forced to code switch into isiXhosa as a form of escapism from incompetence in the language of learning and teaching (English). In view of this, Macaro (2003: 30) states that the cognitive approach to learning, including second language learning, "stresses the notion that the individual is *active, constructive* and *planful*". Thus, acquiring a second language and communicating through it involves mental processes (Macaro 2003: 30). However, as much as children are active in their learning, much of that learning, according to McLeod's (2007) principle of scaffolding occurs when they are assisted by those with more knowledge. In practice, teachers, older siblings and friends, parents to name a few of those who have already acquired English competence, should purposely and systematically help English L2 learners to improve their proficiency

in English. Thus, since the class teachers are not proficient in English, it implies that the learners themselves cannot become proficient. The environment in this regard, is therefore responsible for the lack of proficiency in the language of teaching and learning.

Contrary to this argument, Shastri (2010) thinks that a FAL speaker's proficiency should be the same as the L1 speaker's. The researchers however disagree with Shastri, having observed for years, highly competent English second language speakers still need to occasionally consult a dictionary for meanings of some English vocabulary. Actually, the researchers do not expect the learners and teachers that are the focus of this study to be as proficient in English as English L1 speakers. Indeed, Archibald (2014) eloquently states: "Writing in a second language is further complicated by issues of proficiency in the target language, first language literacy, and differences in culture and rhetorical approach to the text".

In terms of Shastri's argument, Van Rooyen and Jordaan (2009) state that academic writing may be the most challenging skill for L2 learners. This is evident in the type of essays that learners write. There is gross violation of writing conventions principally because the learners think in their mother tongue and then translate into English. It should be said that, since their teachers make extensive use of mother tongue in classroom, the learners are not motivated enough to learn the language of teaching and learning. Unfortunately, their tasks and examinations are written in English and they cannot do otherwise but to write in English

## CONCLUSION

As noted earlier in the background and literature, English is one of the most widely spoken/used languages in the world. Thus, gaining English proficiency can be an important aspect of education in many fields. Even native English speakers can benefit from increasing knowledge and improving the different literacy skills. There can be many accessible ways to improve English proficiency.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

It is essential for teachers to note that the four literacy skills move hand to hand and it is

almost difficult to divorce one from the others. This is in view of the fact that if learners are being taught in their mother tongue, they do not see any reason to sharpen their interest in learning through English. It is evident that if one is not eloquent in a language and attempts as much as possible to use a given language, then proficiency is farfetched.

The first possible means of gaining proficiency in any language is speaking it regularly. Although self-study can improve reading and comprehension skills, interacting with other language speakers can be essential to expose language learners to the language varieties, comprehension and practical use of the language. If one lives in a multilingual society like South Africa, one should put aside a certain amount of time each day for speaking an additional language. Making and interacting with new friends with the speaker of that language might increase proficiency. Living in a given language community can immerse you in their language.

The way that can ease language learning is through watching or listening to media (watching Television, newspapers, magazines etc.). This style of language learning can improve comprehension and vocabulary without feeling like you are studying.

It is meaningful to suggest also that the internet is full of resources that can improve language proficiency. Reading news articles at a particular language website can lead to reading comprehension. The internet can also help to improve vocabulary since definitions can be looked up easily from the free Dictionaries online. Participating in a language-speaking message forum community is another way of improving writing ability while discussing topics of interest.

Although, there seem to be many informal ways to improve language proficiency, taking formal classes or joining a club dedicated to learning a given language can accelerate learning. Classes can help increase motivation and keep you on a normal schedule of study, which is important for learning any language. If you are not motivated to learn a language you can become frustrated and can easily give up. Once motivation to learn the language is there, spending a short time each day to learn the language can produce better, longer-term results than a full day and then staying away to return after a while.

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