



An Investigation of Learning English as a Second Language in Korea

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Purpose: Decades of literature have described that learning English as a second language (ESL) is an important yet difficult undertaking for Korean university students. This study investigated, from an educational and social perspective, student perceptions on how they learned, comprehended, communicated, and used ESL.

Methods: An exploratory descriptive method used conclusions from the literature followed by interviews with 14 students from different universities examined factors they perceived impacted the ability and confidence with the acquisition of basic English language skills.

Results: Learning English as a second language (ESL) is influenced by choices in approaches to student learning. Interviewees reflected on their personal experiences and reported on different approaches within programs for learning English as a second language. The emergent categories and themes highlighted challenges at each educational level, as well as the influence of Korean cultural factors and social issues on learning outcomes. The latter are confined to meeting examination requirements rather than listening skills and comprehension that would achieve fluency in ESL.

Conclusion: Given the importance that listening comprehension plays in Korean students' achievement of fluency in the English language, it is suggested ESL teachers could integrate more active learning approaches and methodologies into their teaching/learning approaches to assist competence and confidence with English conversation would overcome problems arising from the difference between Korea's first and second languages.

Keywords: English as a second language; ESL education and practices; Global communication

INTRODUCTION

The English language has an important communication role in an increasingly globalized world (Cho, 2012); it is used by many international businesses, organizations, and academic conventions globally (Gil, 2010). Additionally, English is the international language used in literature, movies, television, and music all over the world. English has been the international language for communication since the 17th century because of the influence of England and the United States. Every country in the world uses English for international communication; it is important for university students to perfect and improve their ESL listening and speaking skills.

Chew (2009) stated that advocates of English recognize it is taught to several million Asians globally because “English is now used as an international language (a.k.a. English as an international language—EIL) between people from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds” (Lee & Hsieh, 2018). Therefore, it is important for Korean university students to learn English as a second language. Furthermore, English has become a significant part of efforts to improve the international reputation of Korea's higher educational institutions (Mok & James, 2005).

In addition to investigating how Korean university students learn and understand ESL, this

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study explored student perceptions of difficulties students encounter when learning English and makes suggestions for addressing those difficulties. Those difficulties include four major problems: First, the students' negative sentiment toward ESL (Kim et al., 2014); second, how English education is taught in Korea; third, the English language instruction that focuses on passing tests instead of being able to communicate in English (Bilash & Kang, 2007); fourth and lastly, the difference between Korea's first and second languages—Hangeul and English (Ramanathan, 2005).

Research Questions

Given the purpose of this study was to explore, from an educational and social perspective, how Korean university students learn, comprehend, communicate, and use ESL, three research questions guided the literature review and interviews conducted:

1. How is listening and comprehension beneficial for the Korean students' level of achieved fluency in learning ESL?
2. What methods and theories can Korean university students use to develop their listening comprehension skill that will increase their English fluency level?
3. What ESL listening materials and resources effectively assist Korean university students deal with ESL difficulties that will enhance their English fluency level?

Importance of the Study

One of Korea's major resources is its higher education system (So & Kang, 2013), where English education has become a vital component of the Korean educational curriculum (Lee & Heinz, 2016). Despite the prominent place of English in Korea's educational curriculum, many Korean university students graduate from high school with limited English speaking and listening abilities (Gil, 2010). This affects subsequent ESL listening comprehension, which is a crucial language-learning skill (Al-Qaraghooly & Al-Bermani, 2010).

English is universally used in several fields of study such as medicine, literature, education, technology, communication, politics. While countries have their own distinct languages, Hangeul in Korea for example, politicians in every country use English for communication globally to settle international disputes, follow laws, and guidelines, and act on other important global issues. Therefore, the main goal of learning ESL in South Korea should be for Korean university students to communicate in English internationally with others (Kim et al., 2014).

Over decades listening has been described as a crucial element of communication (Van Duzer, 1997) and the first language re-

quirement for language acquisition (Nancy & Bruce, 1988). In fact, listening is important because without listening students would not be able to communicate with others. It is crucial in any language. Additionally, communication is essential for a person to survive in this world, which is crucial for letting others know what people need in their lives (food, safety, medical assistance, or other important information) when visiting other countries.

Literature Review

While English has been an important subject in Korea for several years, many university students are unable to communicate in English (Taie, 2015) because Korea's existing English curriculum has failed to develop the students' conversational abilities (Cain, 2012). As Korean university students progress through their education, from early public or private school systems to the higher educational system, they have struggled to learn and communicate using English (Craig & Porter, 2014). As a result, "many students leave high school with only the most limited ability to communicate in the language" (Gil, 2010).

When Korean university students enter colleges or universities, they are required to take English classes focused on improving different ESL skills (Kim et al, 2014). Traditionally, Korean instruction has concentrated on grammar, reading, and writing (Ahn, 2015). This has resulted in criticism on various aspects but particularly about how slowly ESL instruction is changing (Butler, 2007) despite students engaging with the ESL educational process for a long time (Taie, 2015). ESL learning methods and procedures have changed over time as the needs for learning English have changed (Ahn, 2015).

ESL Methodology

In addition to understanding difficulties Korean university students encounter when studying ESL, it is important to understand ways to address those difficulties by focusing on ESL methods, approaches, and theories. Three major methods used in South Korea for ESL teaching are the (a) grammar translation method, (b) communication approach, and (c) immersion-based language learning method. Of these, the grammar translation method is the most popular method used (Heinz, 2013). However, the grammar translation method, does not provide the adequate skills to communicate in English (Heinz, 2013).

Difficulties around ESL

It is important to identify and attempt to address efforts to improve learning approaches to ESL. Korean students struggle with educational processes that guide learning and communicating in

English (Craig & Porter, 2014). One of the biggest difficulties encountered by students is the difference between the Korean students' first and second languages, Hangeul, and English. These languages might be two of the most different languages on earth (Heinz, 2013) as well as being totally opposite in language structure.

Another difficulty is Korea's Confucian-oriented educational learning approach (Young, 2011). This differs greatly from Western learning approaches. The Confucian-oriented learning approach relies on "Confucianism philosophy and rote memorization" (Florea, 2011), which affects student communication in the classroom.

Other difficulties Korean students experience include the translation process from English to Hangeul (Hangeul to English), clarity, comprehension, knowledge, memory, sensitivity, context, and responding to basic English skills such as grammar, vocabulary, and language structure (Ramanathan, 2005). Given Korean social and emotional features students are more comfortable with nonparticipative, passive, teacher centered learning environment rather than a participative, student-centered learning environment (David-West, 2010). Finally, most ESL conversation by students occurs inside English education classrooms or English academies. Students do not use English for conversation within the Korean culture. These factors make it difficult for Korean students to learn English well enough to be comfortable communicating in English (Heinz, 2013).

Language Learning Difficulties

One common difficulty in ESL class learning is students' silence, which seems to be a product of Korea's cultural ideology, which includes continuing social order and saving face (Lui, 2005). This silence can hinder instruction for students. Kramsch and Zhu (2016) argued culture and language are interconnected when teaching any language. However, the English language is significantly different than the Korean language (Young, 2017). Native language and memorization are central to Korea's Confucian cultural educational system, but ESL learning approaches demand a different learning culture. The ESL approaches and design can be affected by many factors (Lee & Heinz, 2016) but are major reasons for language learning difficulties in Korean ESL classrooms.

The three methods (grammar translation, communication, and immersion-based language learning) previously mentioned may contribute to learning difficulties (Lee, 2016). Two decades ago, Jeong (2004) noted that "most Korean students enter college with strong grammatical knowledge and rudimentary communi-

cation skills in English" (p. 33). While Confucius promoted an educational philosophy using conversation, understanding, contemplation, and memorization (Rao & Chan, 2009), Korean educators have focused on memorization and grammar.

Theories and Methods: Resolving English Language Difficulties

For students to learn ESL effectively, they must resolve learning difficulties; this can be done by using various ESL theories and methods: Three can be used to resolve those problems and provide students listening skills and comprehension to communicate in English more effectively. The first is Krashen's (1989) input hypothesis theory. Krashen's (1985) second-language acquisition theory has five main hypotheses: (a) natural order, (b) acquisition/learning (c) monitor, (d) input, and (e) affective filter. Krashen (1989) stated that this method also provides students with ESL language 'comprehension' that is slightly above the students 'understanding', thus explaining how students receive comprehensible input from 'listening' to 'spoken' English.

Two other ESL methods are the bottom-up and top-down process methods. Vandergrift (2004) stated that Krashen's (1989) input hypothesis model has been instrumental in developing these. Rost (2002) has also shown how crucial the bottom-up and top-down approaches are for understanding.

These two methods have distinctively different techniques, as students interpret and process language (Luo & Gao, 2012). The bottom-up process uses existing linguistic knowledge to comprehend the message's meaning, while the top-down process breaks the whole sentence into sentence parts (Vandergrift, 2007). Therefore, the bottom-up and top-down processes work together to provide ESL listening comprehension (Morley, 1991). By using these methods, students are provided with linguistic and background knowledge (Park, 2004).

Rost argued that when students combine the bottom-up and top-down process methods, students can understand the English spoken language (Rost, 2002). The two methods use grammatical and world knowledge in parallel design, as students create intellectual representations of what is communicated to them (Hulstijn, 2003) and build a framework for comprehension (Vandergrift, 2007). The methods combined with Krashen's input hypothesis model provide and strengthen the ESL listening comprehension that Korean university students need to understand and communicate in English with people globally.

Listening importance in ESL

Brown (2000) argued, "A language is part of a culture, and a

culture is part of a language; the two are intricately interwoven” (p. 177). Without language, people would not be able to communicate, and culture would not be able to survive (Brown, 2000). The primary purpose of language is to be able to communicate socially (Armstrong & Ferguson, 2010). Yin (2012) stated that “language is a socializing tool” (p. 407) used for communication. The primary purpose of English instruction in Korea is to prepare students to use English in a global setting (Butler, 2015) as it is the core language of the world (Lee & Heinz, 2016) and an important second language for Korean University students (David-West, 2010).

Listening is the first language skill people learn and use when learning any language (Gilakjani, 2016) and is important for individuals to understand what is communicated. Without listening, people would not be able to acquire knowledge that is being communicated to them (Lee & Heinz, 2016). Language learning begins when we are infants (Junge & Cutler, 2014) and listening is the first thing infants do. An infant is dependent on their parents for survival, which includes parents training the infant in communication skills. While infants can recognize certain words, they do not understand until they are taught the words (Junge & Cutler, 2014). This only happens when infants listen to the words that are repeated by their parents.

The best way to become an effective communicator is to improve listening skills before focusing on speaking skills (Yin, 2012). Oxford (2001) argued listening occurs faster than speaking and is vital in the learning development of other new language skills. Additionally, research has shown listening improves other language skills (Graham, 2017). Therefore, listening is the first communication skill that people learn while growing up. For this reason, listening is so important for learning a language.

However, listening in communication has been shown to be the most neglected language skill taught in language instruction (Kaur, 2014). Vandergrift (2004) declared listening is possibly “the least explicit of the four language skills” (p. 3), which makes it very tough to learn, and stressing the concept of listening instruction is changing. Also, according to Vandergrift (2004), listening is no longer considered a passive language exercise, requiring little instruction. In fact, without acquiring good listening skills, students cannot communicate efficiently. Furthermore, listening strengthens the other communication skills (Graham, 2017). It is listening that produces the establishment of all factors of language and intellectual growth, which will play “a life-long role in the processing of learning and communication essential to productive participation in life” (Al-Qaraghooley & Al-Bermami, 2010).

METHODS

Through interviews with students this qualitative exploratory descriptive study explored, from an educational and social perspective, how Korean university students perceive they learn, comprehend, communicate, and use ESL. The study aimed to contribute to understanding experiences Korean ESL university students encounter when learning ESL by exposing difficulties they reported when involved in ESL education and exploration of ways to resolve those difficulties. and become competent ESL communicators.

A convenience approach to recruitment was taken. Five of the participants participated in the researcher’s university English class, while the other nine were recommended by the researcher’s colleagues. In preparing the participants for the interview, the researcher provided participants with research questions. Additionally, each participant was interviewed and recorded separately by the researcher. These recordings were stored on a USB and put in a locked storage place.

Ethical Considerations

The researcher created a document for potential participants asking them to volunteer to be involved in the study. The document was an informed consent cover letter that explained the purpose of the research, the research procedures, the potential risks or discomforts, the potential benefits of the research, the confidentiality and data storage, the participation and withdrawal process, and questions about the research. The document contained an assurance of confidentiality and privacy for each participant and stated that the participants’ name and school identities would not be made public. Instead, the researcher used generic terms for the participants and universities. Each participant was told that they could withdraw from the study at any time. The participants’ documents and transcribed interviews were saved and placed in a safe location for five years. When the researcher finished explaining the informed consent form, he asked each participant to sign the informed consent form and then the researcher signed the consent form.

Interview Processes

Questions were given to voluntary participants (n = 14) in advance to assist in their preparation. All the interviews were conducted and recorded through internet zoom sessions because of the COVID virus pandemic. The students’ names and universities were not recorded to protect their identities.

The interview questions explored how Korean university stu-

dents learn ESL, with a focus on participants' elementary, middle school, high school, and university educational experiences. After students answered how long they had been learning English; the ESL questions were separated in the participants' grade levels. This allowed the researcher to find out how the participant's ESL learning advanced through their education journey. In addition to exploring the participants' ESL learning experiences, the study examined how Korea's language, cultural, and educational backgrounds affected participants' ESL learning. In addition, the students were asked questions on how the Korean culture and society affected learning English. Questions asked included 'what was the first English word they heard, and did you understand what was being said? When did you start talking with others in English? Did you understand the conversation? Who told you that English was important for Koreans to learn and why?'

Data Analysis

After interviewing the fourteen participants, the researcher separated the feedback from participants into different categories and themes: educational levels, cultural factors, and social issues. The researcher then compared the participants' answers to summarize findings.

Findings

The student's ages ranged from 21 years old to 27 years old. There are nine male and five female Korean university students. There was one university freshmen, five sophomores, seven juniors, and one university senior. Five students were from the same university, while the other nine attended different Korean universities

English as a Second Language (ESL) Educational Background

Each student began learning the English language at a different time in their life. One student stated that he started when he was three, and another when four years old. Other student's English language learning ranged from pre-school to the 5th grade in elementary school. Table 1 shows the length of time that each student had been learning English.

Student's Education

The fourteen participants were asked how they learned the English language within the Korean education system. Feedback has been separated into education levels and the influence of social and cultural factors.

Elementary school

The majority of the Korean university students stated that they began their English educational journey by third grade. However, several students had the advantage of learning the English language in Western countries at an early age. This made learning English in Korean elementary school easier for them.

The main resource used for ESL education was the English textbook. Yet, other resources used were books using easy English expression, English CDs, English pop songs, and watching English television, movies, or videos. However, the greatest English resource was the English teachers who provided students with their ESL education. Some of the students went to English academies or had English tutors. This helped them advance their English communication skills as well as other basic English skills.

The most difficult part of ESL learning for students was comprehension. This was because a major part of learning English for the students was learning and memorizing English vocabulary instead of learning how to use ESL in conversation. While several students did say that they had native English-speaking teachers in elementary school, the English conversation classes had too many students and were time limited. This made it very difficult for the students to improve their conversation skills. However, the students said they enjoyed learning English in elementary school; especially those that had native English-speaking teachers.

Middle School

The Korean students stated that learning English in middle school was much different than learning English in elementary school. They stated that while they used many of the same English

Table 1. Years studying English as a second language

University	Gender	Studying English (years)
Same University	Female 1	8
	Female 2	16
	Male 1	12
	Male 2	15
	Male 3	15
Different University	Male 1	15
	Male 2	14
	Male 3	20
	Female 1	16
	Male 4	14
	Female 2	13
	Female 3	14
	Male 5	8
Male 6	8	

resources used in elementary school, the English class did not focus on the communication aspect. The English classes focused on grammar, translation, reading, and listening. Listening was included because it was included in the English exams. Furthermore, middle school was the first step in the students' educational journey in preparing students for high school exams as well as the Korean College Scholastic Ability Test (CSAT).

The students said that most of their English teachers in middle school were Korean. If students had native English-speaking teachers in middle school, they were used to prepare students for taking English tests. If students did have English conversation classes, the classes were too large (40 students) with limited time spent on conversation; this hindered students' learning ESL conversation. Most ESL classes were taught in Hangeul (Korean language) instead of English. Finally, because the emphasis was on passing ESL exams, students' ESL conversation was non-existent. This would continue for the students during their high school ESL education.

High School

Interviewees said that Korean high school English classes focused mainly preparing for the university exam (Su Neong/KSAT). Most English teachers were native Korean English teachers who taught English grammar and structure as well as English vocabulary. There was very little or no English conversation during English classes.

The Korean high school education system was reported to be test oriented. This again eliminated Korean high school ESL conversation classes and made it difficult for Korean students to increase their English communication skills. Furthermore, students used only Hangeul (Korean) both inside and outside the classroom. Students did not practice English conversation because the students' focus was passing the Su Neong (university exam).

Korean high school ESL classes focused on English grammar, structure, and vocabulary. Other English high school classes included reading, writing, and listening. Listening was taught only because it was part of the university exam. However, what students heard in English they reported that did not always understand. The listening comprehension only happened when what they heard was translated into Hangeul. Students ESL education focused only on passing the university exam.

In summary, many of the students did not enjoy learning English in high school because of the structure around English high school education focusing only on English language mechanics and not on English conversation. Classes were done this way so students would pass the university exam (Su Neong).

University

Korean university classes focus on ESL in a different way to students' prior public education. University English classes focus on ESL conversation skills. The students have both native English as well as Korean professors who taught English grammar, and ran writing, and reading classes; the native English-speaking professors concentrated more on English conversion skills (speaking and listening). There is a balance of English education within the university education system. Also, university ESL classes provide resources so that students who are required to take English tests (TOEIC; TOEFL) can graduate.

However, it is difficult for students to practice English conversation in Korea. The only time most students use English is in their ESL classroom or in English academies. This is because Koreans primarily use Hangeul in the Korean society. Also, Korea does not have many foreigners, so this makes ESL students nervous when speaking with native English-speakers.

Influence of Hangeul, Korean culture, and Educational Environment

From the interviewees, the idea that the Korean culture values Korea's native language was Hangeul was reinforced. Koreans believe that speaking Hangeul is part of being Korean. Koreans do not speak English daily in Korea. Many older Koreans never learned and cannot use English for conversation. These issues make it very difficult for these Korean students to practice English in the Korean society.

Additionally, Koreans ESL communication is hindered because they are afraid of making conversational mistakes. While Korean students know that English is important for passing the university exam as well as getting into a good Korean university, their ESL education is limited because they do not practice ESL conversation daily. These two main reasons hinder Koreans from becoming effective English communicators.

Future Needs and Recommendations

Korean students can become better ESL communicators if the Korean education system would embrace English more as a language for communication and less as a resource for passing examinations. While learning English structure is important, that can be learned when students begin to have English conversations with native English speakers and each other. Furthermore, students need be willing to practice both inside and outside the classroom.

Korean students would benefit from a balanced English education system in Korea. If the Korean education system would pro-

vide more English conversation classes in the future, Korean students would become much better English communicators.

Furthermore, students' ESL communication comprehension skills would increase if teachers provided these alternative ESL resources, English portfolios, ESL learning centers, native English speaking pen pals, etc. as well as providing students a way of translating ESL conversation into Korean context. Also, [Yoon, Park, and McMillan \(2017\)](#) state that "students experience flipped learning using online contents," that would support active learning. This allows students to discover current ESL resources and materials that provide ESL listening comprehension.

Additionally, both Korean and native English-speaking teachers should encourage and motivate students to practice English conversation outside the classroom. Moreover, if students practiced more outside the English classroom, they would worry less about making mistakes when speaking in English. English communication is used by Korean government officials when speaking with other governments as well as being used by Korean international business organization. Furthermore, with more foreigners visiting and moving to Korea, the Korea culture, economy, and education environment would benefit if English were used more within Korean society for conversation.

DISCUSSION

The results showed that Korean culture, education environment, and native language did influence how the participants learned English. The literature review and the interviews has shown how students can effectively develop ESL with their teacher's instruction and guidance, the use of suitable ESL resources, applying strong ESL theories and methods, and students' practicing the English language. Additionally, students can improve their ESL comprehensive input by using good ESL theories and methods that involve more student-centered active approaches to learning.

Krashen's input hypothesis theory as well as the bottom-up process and the top-down approach. [Krashen's \(1989\)](#) Input Hypothesis Theory uses five hypotheses, natural order, acquisition/learning, monitor, input, and affective filter methods that will provide students with a process of obtaining the necessary input to understand ESL conversation. However, Krashen cautioned that while the five hypothesis methods will assist students obtaining comprehensive input that input will be slightly above their understanding.

The students' ESL comprehensive input can be strengthened even more by also using two other methods along with Krashen's

theory. The bottom-up and top-down processes help strengthen ESL comprehensible linguistic knowledge and meaning being communicated through the ESL message. The bottom-up process uses existing linguistic knowledge for comprehending the message's meaning. This is done when students construct meaning from translating the sounds of a conversation into words, clauses, sentences, etc. and then applying them to grammatical or syntactic English knowledge rules to clarify the context ([Al-Qaraghooly & Al-Bermani, 2010](#)).

The top-down process breaks whole sentences into parts. The focus is on the conversation's meaning instead of recognizing sounds, words, and sentences ([Carrier, 2003](#)). When using this approach, students can develop hypotheses from the speaker's message and verify or modify the message when necessary ([Vandergrift, 2007](#)).

When combining these three methods, students are provided with ESL comprehensive input that can improve the students' ESL conversational skills. While the literature review explains how the three ESL methods are used to improve the students ESL listening comprehensive input and English conversation, the student interviews described how ESL instruction can improve their comprehensive input, which would make the students stronger ESL communicators.

The students stated that ESL learning can be improved if the Korean education system focused more on learning the language and less on using English for exams. Students also stated when English teachers used fun ESL resources, they were motivated and enjoyed learning English. Furthermore, the findings showed that if students had access to native English-speaking people, they would practice ESL conversation more.

Furthermore, the Korean education system, culture, and language can limit Korean students' comprehensive input. This is because Korean education focuses on passing exams and not on ESL communication. Also, the education system relates to Korean culture and Hangeul. In fact, the Korean culture values Korea's native language, Hangeul.

Limitations

Any research has limitations. The purpose of this disclaimer is to acknowledge the researcher and methodological bias in relation to the conduct of the research and statement findings.

Power Distance and Individualism

I am a White man from the United States and an English instructor. The United States and South Korea have differing power distance and individualism profiles, applying [Hofstede's \(1982\)](#)

cultural dimensions framework. This raises two questions: first, the selection of participants and second, the interview data. I asked the students to participate in the study, which may introduce a limitation given my role as a Korean university English instructor. Questions arise about the capacity of students to provide informed consent due to cultural differences. A question arises about how power distance and individualism might have influenced participants' narratives, particularly exclusionary data, alternative viewpoints, etc.

Language Concerns

Participants interviews were conducted in English, and the students were English learners. This raised a question about the abilities of students to fully engage with and communicate me about their lived experiences.

Researcher Bias

There is an adage that a researcher finds what they seek. I have definitive ideas about how language learning should occur.

CONCLUSIONS

This qualitative exploratory descriptive study has shown how Korean students perceive they can improve their ESL comprehensive input to become better ESL communicators. The researcher used literature that described three methods that can provide students with ESL comprehensive input, Krashen's Input Hypothesis Theory, the bottom-up process, and the top-down process.

The students' learning that involves listening, comprehension and input skills are influenced by choice of resources, educational methods, and approaches used during their learning journeys.

The study described how the Korean education system and culture affected Korean students' ESL learning and communication in Korea. For students to strengthen ESL conversational skills, they need to change their views on English education. The focus needs to be more about ESL conversation and less about ESL exams.

Implications for Educational Practices

For students to improve ESL conversation, they must increase their ESL comprehensive input. This can happen by giving students adequate ESL resources, using contemporary student-centered theories and methods, and motivating and encouraging students to use ESL conversation more. Confident and competent English speakers will influence Korean culture to be more sup-

portive of ESL communication within Korean society.

By changing educational and cultural views on active learning, Koreans could develop and use resources, methods, and approaches that can increase ESL conversational understanding, which would create competent ESL communicators in Korea. If students become more competent English speakers, they could become globally successful whether it is in education, business, or any other worldly field. Furthermore, successful ESL communicators would strengthen Korea globally as a country.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declared no conflict of interest.

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