

## **Content and Language Integrated Learning for CSL Students Using a Picture-Book Approach: An Action Research in Hong Kong Kindergartens**

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### **Abstract**

This paper examines the function of content and language integrated learning (CLIL) approach in complementary multilingual kindergarten classrooms for non-Chinese-speaking (NCS) children learning Chinese characters in Hong Kong. The module of this study was implemented with a picture-book approach. The participants comprised 28 learners of Chinese in the third year of kindergarten (K3) from both two kindergartens in Hong Kong. The student participants came from Nepal, Pakistan, the Philippines, and India. The participants' learning of vocabulary was tested using a pre-test and delayed post-test design. The results reveal that the CLIL module with picture modulest desighad similar positive effects on both speaking and reading. The lessons were videotaped, and the teachers were interviewed after the one-year intervention. The results of the pre-test analyses are discussed along with how they could inform researchers, and pedagogical implications for teachers are presented.

**Keywords:** CLIL, Teaching Chinese as a Second Language, Picture-Book Approach

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## Introduction

Before Hong Kong's handover to China in 1997, learning Chinese language was not mandatory for South Asian students in government-funded schools as the language subject could be replaced with a European language subject, such as French or German. However, since transfer of sovereignty, 'biliteracy and trilingualism' has officially become the established language policy for education in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR). The goal is for all residents of Hong Kong, regardless of ethnicity, to develop a reasonably good command of written Chinese and English, as well as spoken Cantonese, English, and Putonghua. Therefore, Chinese proficiency has become an obligatory requirement for Hong Kong citizens. In this regard, ethnic-minority students who were born in Hong Kong are required to learn Chinese like the majority of ethnic Chinese students. However, catering to NCS students with varied Chinese-language capabilities has become a major difficulty for teachers.

According to an annual report from Oxfam (2018), non-Chinese-speaking (NCS) children have 20,000 hours less experience with listening to and speaking Chinese at the time when they are enrolled in Hong Kong kindergartens (at approximately 3 years old) than Chinese children who learn Chinese as their first language. While Chinese children are able to raise their hands and answer teachers' questions in the classroom, NCS children still struggle to comprehend what teachers are talking about. Due to the multilingual and multicultural backgrounds of NCS learners, especially kindergarten learners who are emerging bilinguals, it is difficult to help young NCS learners acquire Chinese in Hong Kong in such a multilingual context. Therefore, this study draws attention to the theory of content and language integrated learning (CLIL) to accommodate NCS children's diverse linguistic practices in a multicultural early-childhood classroom.

This paper examines the function of a content and language integrated learning (CLIL) module in two kindergartens and how their students create a variety of learning spaces through a CLIL module. The implications of CLIL are discussed in the context of language education for NCS learners, along with implications for future research.

## Background

### Teaching and Learning of Chinese in Hong Kong Kindergartens

In Hong Kong, it is normal for young Chinese children to start to learn basic Chinese characters when they are about 32 months old in their first year of kindergarten. However, learning content through Chinese is very challenging to both teachers and NCS students in Hong Kong kindergartens due to the lack of teaching training and learning materials. Thus, there is an urgent need to find more efficient ways to teach and learn Chinese, which is one of the major reasons why attention is being paid to CLIL. The term 'CLIL' was coined in 1994 by David Marsh and Anne Meijer's (among others) as an umbrella term to encompass a wide range of situations related to 'the experience of learning non-language subjects through a foreign language' (Marsh, 2012: 28).

CLIL is considered to be an alternative path to conventional classroom and is believed to be a way to transcend the perceived weaknesses of traditional teaching. It has become popular, and CLIL programmes have spread all over Europe in the last decade. In the past, learning content through a second language was limited to very specific social groups, but with CLIL

initiatives, a wider range of learners can now have access to this type of language education, not only those from privileged or elite backgrounds (Arantxa, David, 2015). Nevertheless, education authorities need to evaluate these new programmes and research particular projects to find out what the real benefits and limitations of CLIL might be. This is particularly necessary in Hong Kong, where kindergartens have many NCS children, and programmes that promote Chinese learning are often perceived as a new challenge. As a result, those programmes have been considered highly controversial.

This study considers the potential benefits and challenges of implementing CLIL for NCS children in light of existing research. It highlights the relative lack of attention that has been directed towards CLIL at kindergarten levels so far. Furthermore, a particular pedagogy that might be suitable for CLIL implementation with NCS children in Hong Kong is suggested.

## **Literature Review**

### **CLIL and Second Language Learning**

‘CLIL is an approach in which a foreign language is used as a tool in the learning of a non-language subject in which both language and the subject have a joint role’ (Marsh in Coyle: 2006).

CLIL is a teaching approach in which an additional language is used for the teaching and learning subjects with a dual focus on language and content. According to Coyle et al. (2010), CLIL is a post-method pedagogy model that has been influenced by different theories that have traditionally had an enormous impact on education. Some of the commonly mentioned benefits of CLIL include the triggering of high levels of communication between teachers and learners and among learners themselves, as well as improving overall language competence in the target language, particularly oral skills (Arantxa, David, 2015).

As Brown (2006: 91) notes, there are a multitude of reasons why children may have difficulty acquiring a second language, including complex personal, social, cultural, and political factors. In response to these, the CLIL approach may offer greater and more flexible opportunities to improve language learning. According to Marsh (2000), CLIL offers young learners more realistic and natural opportunities to learn and use an additional language in such a way that they soon forget about learning the language as such and focus only on learning the content.

### **CLIL and Vocabulary Learning**

A widely discussed topic in language acquisition is the learning of vocabulary. Consequently, CLIL approaches have given special attention to this topic. It is argued that in a CLIL setting, there are more opportunities to learn vocabulary because it is used in contexts for real communication. As a result, learning takes place in a more meaningful way. Many studies seem to support the idea that CLIL has a positive effect on the acquisition of general vocabulary of a target language, with receptive vocabulary being more clearly affected than productive (Arantxa, David, 2015).

Nevertheless, more evidence is needed for the impact of the CLIL approach on more specific, content-related vocabulary in both production and reception. In order to fill this gap in the literature, this study examines the content-related vocabulary in both production and

reception in pre-test and post-test phases. The main target is specific content-related vocabulary. Picture books were made based on eight unit topics that are commonly used by kindergartens. The reason for choosing the vocabulary used is that learning vocabulary is one of the objectives of the curriculum. By targeting this particular type of vocabulary, we focus on how well NCS students learn Chinese by CILI approach, which is an area that has not been greatly researched.

## **Second Language Acquisition Theory**

Second Language Acquisition (SLA) theory refers to the study of learning a second or additional language aside from one's first language. The first language is referred to as L1, while the secondary language is referred to as L2 or the target language. Dale, van der Es, and Tanner (2010, pp. 20-21) provide a useful overview of four areas of SLA theory that are relevant to CLIL teachers: input theory, intake theory, output theory, and social models of second language acquisition. Language input theories in SLA emphasize that the input given to learners (the language they read and hear) needs to be meaningful, relevant, and realistic. It should also be at a slightly higher level than the current level of the learner ( $i+1$ , where  $i$  represents the current language level) (Krashen, 1985). Input theory also recognises that learners will be able to understand more language than they are able to produce in the target language.

Intake theory also focuses on the input learners receive but places more focus on the need for learners to encounter L2 frequently, as well as the time needed to process this language (Long, 1983). Output theory argues that learners have to produce the second language in order to learn it. By speaking or writing, learners can then notice the differences between what they can produce and what they want to produce (Swain, 1985). Furthermore, output theory emphasizes the need for learners to be creative and make mistakes with the second language. Language production is key to learning L2 according to output theories of SLA (Swain, 1995).

## **CLIL in Early Childhood Education**

Marsh (2012) has observed that since the mid-1990s, CLIL has expanded considerably in Europe, where 'early language learning, whether at kindergarten, pre-school or primary, inevitably involved forms of CLIL' (p. 133). He notes a number of new European initiatives to implement CLIL with pre-secondary learners, although it seems that not much data are available on the relative success of any of these, and it is necessary to admit that CLIL 'statistics are particularly hard to obtain on kindergarten and pre-schooling' (p. 175). There have been some specific studies on CLIL with pre-secondary learners (e.g. Buchholz (2007)), but again, they are mostly from Europe, which highlights the general lack of research on CLIL for young learners worldwide.

Part of the reason for this may be that in many regions, there is little practical knowledge about what CLIL and related approaches really represent and how to implement them, not to mention resources to carry out quality educational research. Even where such knowledge and resources are available, CLIL may often be understood as an approach that is more suitable for older children who are already equipped with more advanced academic/cognitive skills, as well as perhaps some competence in the vehicular language. However, it is also the case that CLIL approaches become less CLIL-like with younger children; in other words, educational approaches involving additional languages with younger children have long been

more CLIL-like than is appreciated by many educators (Marsh, 2012). Indeed, Coyle, Hood, and Marsh (2010) emphasize that ‘it is often hard to distinguish CLIL from standard forms of good practice in early language learning,’ in which children’s ‘main focus is on the doing – be it playing, singing, drawing, building models, or other activities’ (p. 17). This reflects the findings of a European Commission study on teaching additional languages to very young learners (Edelenbos, Johnstone & Kubanek, 2006). Thus, good practice in teaching additional languages to children (see Bialystok, 2008; Cameron, 2001) is indeed also good CLIL practice to a certain extent.

This study considers the potential benefits and challenges of implementing CLIL for NCS children in light of the existing research. The study highlights the relative lack of attention that has been directed thus far towards CLIL in early-childhood education in Hong Kong. There are few research-based empirical studies that investigate the function of CLIL with a picture-book approach, particularly among NCS children. Therefore, the main aim of this action research is to investigate the impact of CLIL on learning Chinese characters among NCS students in Hong Kong kindergartens.

## **Methods and Participants**

### **The Action Research**

The present study is based on the hypothesis that a CLIL picture-book approach can help students with learning Chinese characters in a more effective manner than the traditional educational methodology. Two kindergartens were examined with regard to Chinese language teaching. The research questions are the following:

- 1) Can CLIL with a picture-book approach facilitate the learning of Chinese characters among NCS kindergarten students?
- 2) What is the function of CLIL for NCS children’s learning of Chinese in Hong Kong kindergartens?

The participants in this study were 28 learners in the third year of kindergarten (K3) from two kindergartens in Hong Kong. The student participants came from Nepal, Pakistan, the Philippines, and India. An action research method was used to compare the performance of these NCS learners with respect to three aspects of Chinese character mastery: shape, sound, and meaning recognition. Data obtained from lesson observations and recordings of student interactions during the lessons. Audio and video recordings were taken, and semi-formal interviews were conducted with both of the teachers involved. All teacher participants were formally interviewed twice per year, and the researchers took detailed notes. Student work samples and other items were collected from the school and classroom, and video or audio were recorded from lesson observations and classroom discourses for detailed analysis.

### **Planning and participants**

Two kindergartens (A and B) collaborated with us in this project. The students of Kindergarten A are entirely NCS children, whereas those in Kindergarten B are mainly local ethnic Chinese children. Prior to the trial teaching, staff of the research team visited the two partner schools to understand their usual teaching situations, prepared teaching materials and discussed the arrangement of the pre-test with the schoolteachers. The time schedule and arrangement of teaching materials were decided according to each kindergarten’s school-

based curriculum. In addition, samples of NCS students' exercises and tests were collected to prepare for the comparative analysis in later stages. 20 NCS children from Kindergarten A and 8 NCS children from Kindergarten B took part in the pre-test and the post-test.

### ***The curriculum content of CLIL approach***

When organising curriculum content, fragmented and trivial learning content is not recommended, and in order to connect different learning area the researcher team had select familiar experiences or events related to children's daily life as the learning themes based on their interests, pace of development, abilities and prior knowledge. Featuring the 4 C elements of CLIL suggested by Coyle et al. (2010), the aim of the curriculum is to develop NCS students' interest in learning Chinese characters and culture, as well as to reinforce their understanding of Chinese language. The CLIL approach was taken as a reference for the character recognition strategy used in this study to examine the effectiveness of this approach in assisting NCS students' acquisition of Chinese characters. As a result, the existing Chinese character-recognition pedagogies can then be reflected upon and modified. The theoretical framework of the CLIL picture-book approach for Chinese characters is shown in Figure 1.

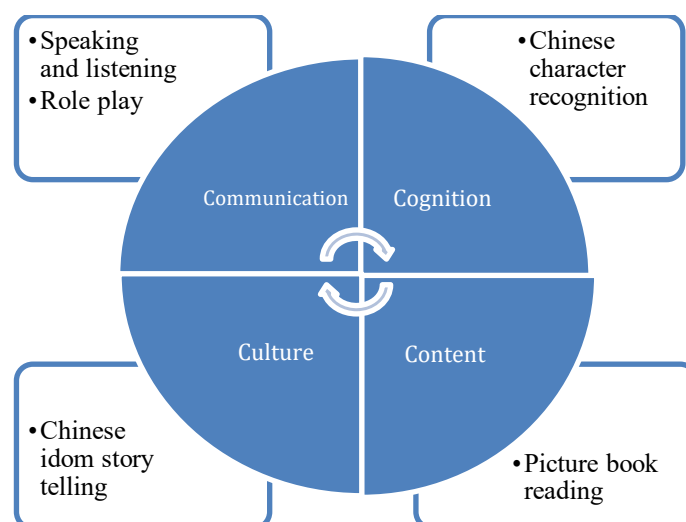


Figure 1: The theoretical framework of CLIL with picture-book approach for learning Chinese characters

### **Chinese Picture Books and Related Learning Materials**

The contents of our picture books were based on eight unit topics that are commonly used by Hong Kong kindergartens. An integrated approach that coherently connects different learning areas, e.g. schools, families, friends and relatives, food, transportation, community, four seasons and festivals, etc. were adopted to facilitate a balanced development of children in the domains of ethics, intellect, physique, social skills. The picture book themes consists of a series of learning experiences (See Figure 2: The themes of picture books connecting different learning areas with an integrated approach).

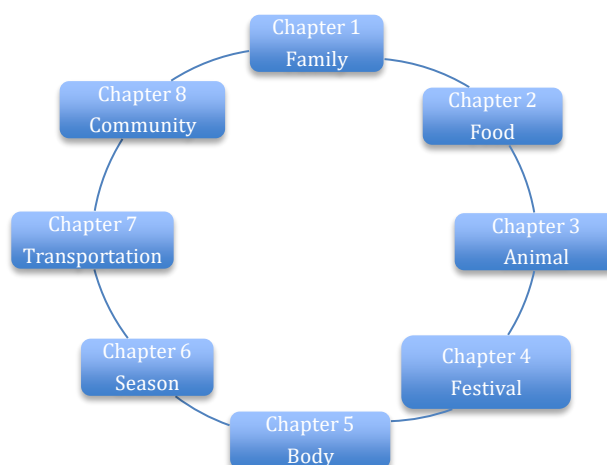


Figure 2: The themes of picture books connecting different learning areas with an integrated approach

### The Rationale for Using Picture Books

Picture books are an important medium through which young children acquire new language and concepts (Strouse, Nyhout, & Ganea, 2018). Recent research on picture books has attempted to identify what features of such books support or hinder children's learning and transfer of information to the real world (e.g., Ganea, Pickard, & DeLoache, 2008; Ganea & Canfield, 2015). Looking at picture books can be considered as an early form of reading. A picture book tells stories through pictures and words, and its visual and intuitive style of presentation matches the psychological features of children, as promoted by the *Kindergarten Education Curriculum Guide* (Education Bureau, 2019). The curriculum guide encourages teachers to guide children with observation, saying food names or the meanings of pictures, and to enhance their speaking and expression capabilities using pictures. The stories in picture books match children's life experiences, interests, and prior knowledge and are created with suitable levels of difficulty of text and repetitive sentences. The way of combining pictures and words also helps students establish in their minds a connection between the orthography and semantics of characters. Based on these characteristics, picture books were chosen as the main vehicle for reading materials in this study.

The picture books, worksheets, and character cards were all related as a set of learning materials. They had orthographic, phonological, and semantic inputs of Chinese characters as well as comprehensible output. Conducted in different forms of lesson organization, another goal of the study was to re-emphasize knowledge points at different time periods based on a set repetition frequency and repetition period. Frequent repetition helps students convert short-term memory to long-term memory and form a mental lexicon. Figure 3 shows the teaching process of picture-book approach for character recognition.

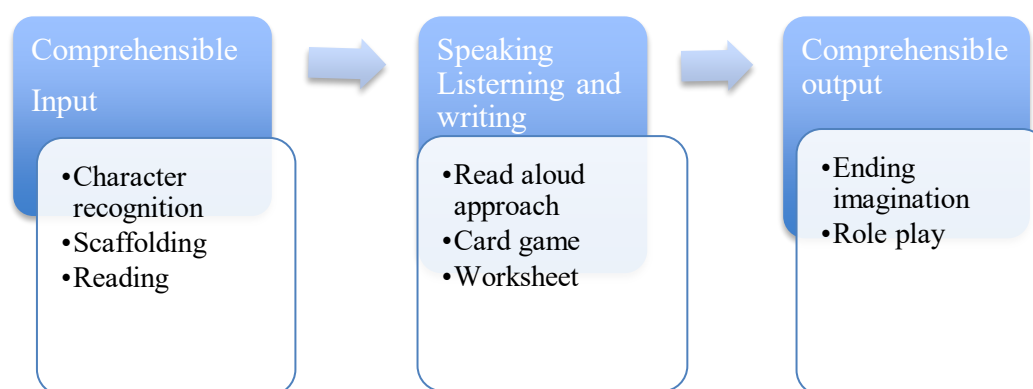


Figure 3: The teaching process of CLIL with a picture-book approach

## The Assessment Tools

After finishing the preliminary work and the production of content-related materials, seven-month lesson observations and paired readings were performed twice a week. There were three lesson observations for each school and a total of 18 paired readings in the whole academic year. At the end of the experimental period, the children were given a post-learning assessment (post-test), which contained the same evaluation tools and contents as the pre-learning assessment given at the start of the experimental period. The study evaluated the effectiveness of the CLIL picture-book approach based on the results of the two assessments and analysed the differences in the children's Chinese proficiency.

## Results and Analysis

### Pre- and Post-Test Performance Comparisons

Table 3 and Table 4 show the average scores of the 28 NCS students in the pre-test and post-test and the comparisons using the paired-sample t-test from the two kindergartens in the three assessments. The statistics show that the NCS students from the two kindergartens had significant improvements in their overall results after the picture-book teaching, especially at Kindergarten B ( $p = 0.00$ , paired-sample  $t$  test). For the 20 students from Kindergarten A, the average pre-test score was 37.5, and the average post-test score significantly increased to 48.5 ( $p < 0.05$ , paired-sample  $t$  test; Table 3).

	Score	Pre-test	n =20	Post-test	n=20
Test items		Average score	Standard deviation	Average score	Standard deviation
Recognising characters with pictures	30	10.9	6.76	14.63	8.27
Distinguishing pronunciations	20	8.8	5.04	9.58	3.86
Associating words with pictures	30	8.57	9.63	17.54	7.8
Total score	80	37.5	21.29	42.17	21.05

\*P&lt;0.01

Table 3: Pre- and post-test results of Kindergarten A  
(whose students are entirely NCS children)

	Score	Pre-test	n =8	Post-test	n=8
Test items		Average score	Standard deviation	Average score	Standard deviation
Recognising characters with pictures	30	9	4.14	8.25	8.03
Distinguishing pronunciations	20	4.75	4.65	7.5	4.87
Associating words with pictures	30	3.75	6.71	23.5	8.67
Total score	80	21.87	16.67	49.06	21.50

\*P&lt;0.01

Table 4: Pre- and post-test results of Kindergarten B  
(whose students are mainly local children)

A much greater increase was observed for the 8 students from Kindergarten B with an average post-test score of 39, which is double the pre-test score of 20.5 (Table 4). The reason for this difference could be the fact that all students in Kindergarten A were entirely NCS students, but Kindergarten B had mainly native Chinese-speaking students. Therefore, the NCS children from Kindergarten B might have more exposure to Cantonese than those from Kindergarten A as a result of the interactions with ethnically Chinese children. According to the teachers from Kindergarten B, some of the NCS students made friends with the Chinese-speaking classmates, so they had many opportunities to hear and speak Cantonese in their daily conversations. This difference in the natural language environment may explain the discrepancies between the two groups of NCS students, as well as highlight the important role of real-life spoken communication in NCS students' acquisition of Chinese.

The improvement in speaking-related test on associating words with pictures at both schools was the most remarkable ( $p < 0.05$ , paired-sample  $t$ -test). The results indicate that the CLIL picture-book approach is very efficient in helping NCS students develop both of speaking (vocabulary production) and reading (vocabulary reception) by connecting character sounds with meaningful context. Compared to the other areas, the evidence shows that students'

content related lexicons grew richer, and their decoding ability was sharpened with the help of pictures. The results from the three assessments and lesson observations revealed that NCS children's improvement of vocabulary production was far more than the improvement in vocabulary reception due to much greater exposure to the comprehensible output.

The results of the assessment support that the CLIL picture-book approach can facilitate kindergarten NCS children's acquisition of Chinese characters, especially for their speaking development, as well as improve overall competence in the target language, particularly oral skills. The CLIL pedagogy provides NCS students with more real-life experience for them to become creative speakers with Chinese in the CLIL classroom.

The results of the assessments and lesson observations also indicated that improving learners' affective dimension has also been a beneficial effect of the proposed approach. NCS students seem to feel more motivated to learn and speak Cantonese in the classroom. This could result from experiencing less stress and anxiety in a learning environment where the focus is not only on language forms, but also meaning and real-life experience. Thus, we suggest that the CLIL picture-book approach helps to make the process of learning Chinese characters more meaningful and less stressful for NCS students.

## **Pedagogical Implications**

### **Teacher Training in CLIL**

An excellent teaching force is an important part of language education. It is obvious that teachers' continuous enhancement of professional knowledge can improve teaching quality, and facilitate the progress of development. To enhance professional competence, there is a need to provide indications to teacher-education institutions called upon to train CLIL teachers. It is suggested that some specific teacher-training courses in this area be provided for kindergarten teachers.

One highlighted aspect of teacher training for CLIL lessons is the teachers' lack of understanding of the role of language in learning. According to the interviews with the two kindergarten teachers, there is no normal training provided to a non-language subject teacher. It is probably not wholly considered in the training of second language teachers either as attention tends to focus on issues of language and language learning rather than on the role of language in learning in general. The teachers become unaware of the issues and of the need to have strategies for facing related problems. For this reason, certain aspects are highlighted for a CLIL training course, which the kindergarten teachers feel are important and needed despite their previous training and accumulated experience in the field. The needs highlighted are:

- a. Understanding the skill to promote NCS students speaking Chinese
- b. Understanding knowledge to create exercises and activities in CLIL lessons
- c. Knowing strategies to overcome problems of comprehension in CLIL lessons

In order to construct a CLIL classroom, it is essential for teacher to sustain and enhance children's learning interest and motivation in learning Chinese, thus it is advised to focus on the teachers training by the following expects:

1. Provide children with opportunities to explore freely, discover knowledge and validate their discovery in learning Chinese by real life experience.
2. Take note of learner's difficulty and differences, encourage children to learn by using their senses and multilingual repertoire.
3. Promote all-round development by choosing real-life themes and provide children with interesting learning experiences by CLIL approach.

Given the paucity of CLIL materials, teachers need to be able to adapt for the specific needs and aims or objectives of the course and lessons. It is suggested that there are three possible ways for kindergarten teachers to acquire this competence: 1) working with language teachers to co-construct the curriculum; 2) joint work among teachers to develop and discuss materials, websites, and their use; 3) creation of specific CLIL websites on content areas, published periodicals for different subjects, and periodical newsletters on different themes. In addition, the government could centralize resources for the development and research of multi-model teaching materials in the future.

## **Conclusion**

This study has investigated the function of CLIL for teaching Chinese to NCS children in Hong Kong kindergartens. After one year of trial teaching and lesson observations, the CLIL approach with picture books was found to be beneficial to the NCS children's oral skills. The results show that the proposed approach can also enrich their mental lexicon and possibly facilitate the transition between kindergartens and primary schools.

Although the project has made certain contributions to the teaching of Chinese characters to NCS children, there is still much to be explored. The present study is subject to several limitations. It adopted only two cases and the sample size of kindergarten B with a small number of NCS children. The findings cannot be generalised to other school contexts. Therefore, it is recommended that the scope of future study be extended to a larger group of NCS children and their teachers, so as to examine the impact of CLIL approach on a wider range of NCS children for a longer period of time.

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