Problems in Perception Content-based Learning Materials for Chinese EFL Learners

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Abstract—**This article explores the problems that EFL learners may encounter when they perceive content-based learning materials. The main questions include: (A) Will inferior reading skills or improper use of learning strategies affect these problems? (B) What are the characteristics of the specific linguistic of reading comprehension that initiate academic problems? (C) How does the learner's learning strategy cause or initiate problems? The data used in this research are learners' midterm exam scores and the frequency of learning strategies employed by students. Including qualitative data in the form of student statements obtained from unstructured participatory interviews, in a descriptive and qualitative way based on content-based reading skills theory and learning strategies, this article will conduct a comprehensive analysis of these materials. As a result of data analysis, there is a situation in which the problems encountered by English readers in understanding content-based learning materials are initiated by inferior reading ability and improper application of learning strategies. The linguistic features of reading comprehension that initiate this problem are the lack of understanding of grammatical features, the low level of vocabulary acquisition, the lack of awareness of sensory construction, and the problems of discourse comprehension. The problems encountered when dealing with learning strategies are improper use of learning strategies, unclear learning goals and poor learning habits.**

Index Terms—**problems, EFL learners, content-based learning materials**

I. INTRODUCTION

In addition to successfully read the materials in reading classroom activities, another main goal of having reading subject at the English Department of Nanchang Business College (NCBC), Jiangxi Agricultural University is to enhance learners to read content-based learning materials the teachers offered. To obtain the academic goal is not an easy job since reading in English as a foreign language (EFL) may face linguistic and non-linguistic obstructions. The linguistic factors usually encountered by EFL learners, such as lack of vocabulary, problems in understanding grammatical rules of the foreign language, inferior basic performance of reading, and inferior level of perception discourse/text are not only naturally encountered by beginners but also by intermediate and pre-advanced learners. On the other hand, the non-linguistic factors such as inappropriate learning strategies, bad reading techniques employed, negative motivation in reading, no sufficient facilities of teaching-learning processes of reading are the classic problems which should be overcome carefully.

According to Masuhara (Tomlinson, 2007), several approaches to the teaching of L2/FL reading have been developed by experts since 1980s to 1990s. The famous approaches are the reading comprehension-based approach, the language-based approach, the skill/strategy-based approach, and the schema-based approach. In addition to the approaches, Masuhara (Tomlinson, 2007) put forward an alternative approach to materials for teaching reading. The alternative method presents four principles, namely: (i) engaging affect should be the major concern of reading materials; (ii) listening to a text prior to reading it helps decrease linguistic demands and enhances learners to concentrate on meaning; (iii) reading comprehension means obtaining multidimensional mental acquisition in the learners' mind; and (iv) materials should assist readers scan the text first before they focus their mind on its language. The approach to materials for teaching reading disputed by Masuhara involves the principles for acquiring reading skills for basic to advanced level of EFL reading. It may serve the reading skill to understand content-based learning materials at university level obtains the four principles of reading materials of reading subjects offered to the learners.

In the teaching-learning processes of language education, especially at the English Education Department of NCBC, Nanchang, the subjects offered in the curriculum can be academically classified, based on learning materials, into skill-based subjects and content-based subjects. The content-based subjects, such as those of linguistic subjects need better skill on reading comprehension, unless the learners mostly obtain inferior academic achievement, then. Based on the result of a research conducted in 2018/2019, most students were not successful enough in perception content-based learning materials. The content-based learning materials are mostly available in reading passages and it is doubtless that reading comprehension skill is highly needed. In fact, however, most students came across serious problems in

perception reading passages (reading materials), particularly the reading passages of *Language Assessment* subject as the research addressed to.

Actually, the students who took the content-based subjects, in this case *Language Assessment,* had already taken the pre-requisite subjects involving language skills which led them to be able to read the materials well. They had learned and passed *Listening, Speaking, Reading, Writing, (English) Grammar, Introduction to Linguistics, Phonology, Morphology, Syntax, and Semantics-Pragmatics,* at least in intermediate levels. It is theoretically supposed that the learners are no longer having serious problems to learn content-based subjects. The learners would have had enough vocabulary, reading comprehension competence, and critical thinking to read and to understand the learning materials of the content-based subjects. In reality, the assumption and expectation could not be successfully gained. In the teaching-learning processes of *Language Assessment* subject, the students majored in English are to read and comprehend the reading passages as recommended in syllabus and instructional programs. The students are in high activities to finish reading tasks and they should be in critical thinking to obtain important information appeared in the passages.

In accordance with the reading problems faced by the university students, several questions may be asked in order to understand why the problems came up. The answers for those questions are possibly used to draw appropriate ways to solve the relevant problems. This study, which is further developed from the result of a research conducted in 2018/2019, particularly discusses the causes of *EFL learners' problems in understanding content*-based learning materials at the English Department of NCBC Nanchang. The subject matter was limited to the teaching-learning processes of *Language Assessment.* In more specific items, the data analysis and discussion are based on three major questions: *(i) are those problems influenced by inferior reading method or unsuitable employ of learning strategies?; (ii) what are the peculiar linguistic characters of reading skills producing the academic problems?; and (iii) how did the readers' studying strategies bring about the problems.* The argument is aimed at revealing the facts the question raised and to formulate reasonable *problems solving for the EFL learners' problems in perception content*-based learning materials.

II. REVIEW OF RELATED THEORIES

A. Reading in a Foreign Language and Language Learning Strategies

Even though reading activities are mostly targeted at perception of the written passages, it is not seriously questioned any longer that reading in L1, L2, or FL may have different problems and difficulties. Reading in a foreign language for its learners, let's say reading in English, frequently finds the phenomena of shortage of practice time for learners who are required to deal with studying a new language and to read for content (Dhieb-Henia, 2006). Accordingly, in some subjects, namely in those of content-based subjects, English is the medium of instruction and a transporter of content information. Consequently, the EFL learners face both language and comprehension problems when they are reading English passages. In this case, it is certain that reading in a foreign language is more difficult compared with reading in L1 and L2.

The ideas of metacognition have been discussed and proposed by many as good methods to overcome classic problems and difficulties in EFL reading, including reading the content-based materials. Apart of that, metacognition, as a linguistic theory, can also be seen as the learning strategies. Metacognition can be understood and defined as: "cognition of cognition" (Carrell, Pharis, and Liberto, 1989); "the conscious awareness of cognitive processes (Bernhardt, 1991); and "knowledge about learning (Dhieb-Henia, 2006). Then, William and Burden (1997) quoted by Dhieb-Henia (2006) mention that metacognitive strategies include an ability to control and regulate consciously the employ of appropriate learning strategies for different situations. They involve an awareness of one's mental processes and a capability to reflect on how one studys, in other words, being aware of what one's knowing. Dhieb-Henia (2006) argues that as applied to reading, these strategies of metacognitive require specifying a purpose for reading, planning how the text will be read, self-revising for mistakes in reading comprehension, and self-evaluating how well the overall objectives are being fulfilled, which allows for taking corrective measures if comprehension is not being achieved.

Students' reading competence can be enhanced when they discover and use specific learning strategies, but it should be memorized that there must be a clear rationale for using specific strategies (1990). According to Johnson (1996), language studying strategies are worthwhile addition to the challenging task of learning and instructing a second and/or foreign language. The metacognitive strategies and metacognition approach are meaningfully applied to improve the reading skill at intermediate and advanced level, such at university level. They are probably applicable for the activities of reading content-based learning materials. Above all, it is essential for the university students to have sufficient understanding on linguistic features used in the reading passages and appropriate-specific learning-reading strategies.

Theoretically, powerful learners are those who are going to be successful. Powerful learners have expanded repertoires of strategies for obtaining education. They know how to profit from a wide range of learning opportunities, from lectures and readings, from collecting and analyzing information and building concepts and theories, and from working together cooperatively (Joice et.al., 1992). Superior learners are able to acquire and set the information and concepts into their long term memory so that they are all becoming knowledge of the subjects learned as the result of the learning processes of content-based subject, as the *Language Assessment* has.

Reading, as an active process of understanding information embodied in a passage or text, needs ability to read thoroughly. Grabe and Stoller (Celce-Murcia, 2001) state that the capability to read – taking overall comprehension as the example – requires that the learner draw information from a text or passage and combine it with information and expectations that the learner already obtains. Sufficient and optimal comprehension after reading a text needs linguistic and non-linguistic factors involved in the text. Therefore, effective readers will use linguistic and non-linguistic knowledge and competence while they are reading in order to gain optimal comprehension. In the learning view point, working with passages means working written language with specific characteristics. Brown (2016) simply mentions the characteristics of written language which include the linguistic and non-linguistic features. The written language is characterized by permanence, processing time, distance, orthography, complexity, vocabulary, and formality. The categories of orthography, complexity, vocabulary, and formality are more on linguistic features, in nature. Linguistic features in a reading text, as in a content-based learning material, need to be understood as the language with such characteristics as opposed to spoken language. The misunderstanding of such characteristics may lead readers to have inferior level of comprehension.

The language competences in a foreign language are intentionally supported by the language awareness, the increasing consciousness and sensitivity in learners to the forms and functions of language (Cartier in Bourke, 2008, P.13). Bourke (2008) argues that an impressive body of research shows that learning consciously also builds interlanguage, one's interim grammar in the mind. Interlanguge has to grow and develop; otherwise rigidness sets in and learners may show over familiar symptoms of a "grammar gap". In reading activities, such as in reading content-based learning materials, the EFL learners have to acquire language awareness and they need to optimally employ it while reading.

B. Content-based Learning Materials for University Students

The term instruction has been used by language methodologists and teachers in the same sense with learning. It seems that the term instruction is commonly used instead of learning in many current references. Although they are similar in general point of view, the term learning comes up more on the students' side, but instruction can be generally regarded as the matters of instructors' side. Theoretically, instruction is used by teachers and experts in order to focus on the learning's and instructional teachers' sides of learning courses. However, the argument on the content-based learning materials for university students in this part can be formally begun with the ideas and concepts of learning and instruction as well.

The materials of teaching-learning at university level, say at the English Department of NCBC Nanchang, can be categorized as content-based materials and skill-based ones. Snow (Celce-Murcia, 2001, P.303) says that the phrase and word content has had various interpretations throughout the history of L2 teaching, but she herself defines the content as the employ of subject matter for second/foreign language teaching purposes. Subject may refer to topics or theories depended on learner's interest or need in an adult, EFL setting or the subjects that students are studying in their elementary school classes. In this study, the meaning of content stated by Snow is adopted because the main instructional purpose of *Language Assessment* subject – the subject learned by the research sample – is to prepare the students for the types of academic problems they come across in their university.

Content-based (also known as "content-centered") language teaching, particularly at university, integrates the learning of some specific subject-matter content with the learning of a second (foreign) language. The overall structure of a content-based curriculum is dictated more by the nature of the subject matter than by language forms and sequences. Then the second/foreign language, is simply the medium to convey informational content of interest and relevant to the learner (Brown, 2001, P.234). On account of this, the content-based subjects offered to learners at university level. As for the English students in NCBC Nanchang, may be the subjects having close relation to the language learning materials or the subjects dealing with teachers training.

In the sense of content-based instruction, Nunan (in Celce-Murcia, 2001) states that content-based instruction comes in many different guises. However, all variations share one common characteristic – language is not presented directly, but is introduced through the content of various subjects. In school situations, this content is typically the regular subjects in the curriculum such as science, geography, and mathematics. Learners acquire the target language in the course studying. Then, patterns and models for content-based instructions are also variously proposed by experts and researchers. Snow (in Celce-Murcia (ed.), 2001:303) states that content-based models can be found in both the foreign and second language settings. Patterns of content-based instruction vary in implementation due to such elements as educational setting, program goals, and target population. All share, however, a common point of departure – the integration of language teaching aims with subject matter instruction.

The ideas above imply that the content-based instructions are the learning materials and/or subjects offered to students in different levels involving subject matters dealing with knowledge instead of skills. In some materials of content-based instructions, language competences are still partially involved, but most of the contents are knowledge and ideas. Therefore, Snow (in Celce-Murcia (ed.), 2001:305) states that models of content-based instruction can be distinguished from each other by several different means. One is by setting; some models are typically implemented in the foreign language setting while others are common in second language context. Another way to distinguish content-based models is by instructional level; elementary school level and secondary or post-secondary levels with

adolescents or adults. A third way is to look at the degree of emphasis on language and content which underlies a particular program.

III. RESEARCH METHODS

As it has been previously mentioned, this paper is derived from and a further development of a research conducted in 2018/2019 academic year, at the English Department of NCBC Nanchang. The research was carried out in the design of a descriptive-quantitative method; it was descriptive in method and quantitative in approach. In the research, the data were in the forms of scores on learning strategies applied by the students in *Language Assessment* subject. The analysis was done in order to argumentatively describe and explain the data in order to have the current portrait of learning strategies used by learners of EFL at the time they were learning a content-based instruction, *Language Assessment*. The procedures of research were initiated by collecting the data through questionnaire distribution and those data were classified in such a way to have classification, tabulation, and quantitative analysis. The conclusion was drawn based on the classification, tabulation, and simple statistical formula (Gay and Airasian, 2000; Gay, Mills, and Airasian, 2009).

The population of this research was all English Department students of NCBC administered as the third year students in 2018/2019 academic year who were taking *Language Assessment* subject. There were130 students as the population of this research. Considering that it was not necessary to involve all population in the research, a two-stage convenience sampling technique was conducted to select the sample. To select the sample, the researcher chose one group of students. Then, among all members of that group the researcher chose the students who firstly took the *Language Assessment* subject. As a result of sampling, 30 students were chosen as the sample of the research and all of them were sitting at group C.

The instrument of the research was a questionnaire dealing with learning strategies habitually applied by learners (research sample) in following a content-based instruction, *Language Assessment*, consisting of 20 items. The items were consulted to other lecturers of both skill-based and content-based subjects at the English Department of NCBC in order to have experts' scientific opinion and reliable assessment.

The data were collected by using the instrument mentioned above in the following practical steps. Firstly, the researcher as also the lecturer of *Language Assessment* subject asked the students to respond to the items in the questionnaire by making a tick (√) in a suitable space of the table provided in the questionnaire. Secondly, the researcher prepared three tables of students' responses in accordance with the three categories of learning strategies being studied. Thirdly, the researcher read each student's responses, filled out the table of responses, and counted the frequency of each type of response. Finally, the researcher measured the percentage of each type of the response. After the data were collected, they were quantitatively analyzed by means of appropriate statistical formula. The following are the steps followed as the technique of data analysis: (1) each group of data was classified and tabulated into a table which contains the explanations, frequency of being selected, and the percentage; (2) the frequency and the percentage of each category and type of data were described and interpreted as argumentatively as possible to answer the research problems and research questions; (3) the accommodation of all quantitative description, explanation, and interpretation was drawn as the research findings and conclusion. In addition to quantitative data, as the major ones collected in the research, this paper includes the data based on a short direct-practical interview with 5 students selected as informants in order to have qualitative data. The qualitative data were collected after the research was conducted and they are intentionally used for this present paper.

IV. DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

It is reasonably stated that most students of English Department of NCBC had serious problems and difficulties in understanding content-based learning materials, in this case, reading passages/texts used for *Language Assessment* subject. Then, *are those problems and/or difficulties affected by inferior reading skill or inappropriate use of learning strategies*? In order to answer this question, let's firstly see the following tables as the summaries of data collected showing the learning strategies (or learning style) used by the learners in pre-classroom activities, in-classroom activities, and post-classroom activities.

TABLE 1
STUDENTS' PRE-CLASSROOM LEARNING STRATEGIES

No	statement	Selected Frequency							
		TP		JR		SR		SL	
		Σ	%	Σ	%	Σ	%	Σ	%
1	I read the objective of each studying table before reading the chapter.	1	2.7	1	2.7	7	18.9	28	75.7
2	I read the objective of every studying item before reading the chapter.	0	0	23	62.2	13	35.1	1	2.7
3	I read the whole chapter from the beginning to the end.	4	10.8	16	43.2	13	35.1	4	10.8
4	I understood all the reasons I read.	2	5.4	22	59.5	13	35.1	0	0
5	I wrote down what I understand in my own words.	10	27.0	14	37.8	13	35.1	0	0
6	I wrote the sentence in the book of understanding.	4	10.8	24	64.9	6	16.2	3	8.1
7	I discussed the lecture with my friends before the lecture was conducted.	7	18.9	22	59.5	6	16.2	2	5.4
8	I wrote a summary of the course (reading report) as quickly as possible.	1	2.7	11	29.7	19	51.3	6	16.2
9	I read the summary I have written.	8	21.6	16	43.2	13	35.1	0	0
10	I recorded incomprehensible material to ask at class.	9	24.3	15	40.5	9	24.3	4	10.8

The data summarized in Table 1 above tell that in pre-classroom learning strategies, there are three dominant learning strategies applied and/or used by the students. The first one was most students (75.7%) always read every title of chapters before reading the content of each chapter they learned. The second dominant pre-classroom learning strategies applied by the students were that they seldom: (i) read and understand the goals (objectives) of learning; (ii) understand and comprehend the content they read; and (iii) discuss the materials and problems they faced with friends before coming to classroom. These data inform that most students did not have good reading comprehension on main points of concepts and theories. The third dominant pre-classroom learning strategies habitually used by the students was taking notes and writing summary. This good learning strategy is theoretically good and mostly essential for content-based instruction including, of course, *Language Assessment*.

The problem is that such useful strategy was only seldom applied by most students. Moreover, they seldom read the notes and summaries. They also seldom discussed the problematic concepts and theories with peers or inquired the teacher in classroom discussion. The information obtained through short-informal interview reveals that the lack of preparation before entering classroom activities frequently occurred in the teaching-learning processes of this content-based subject.

TABLE 2
STUDENTS' IN-CLASSROOM LEARNING STRATEGIES

No	statement	Selected Frequency							
		TP		JR		SR		SL	
		Σ	%	Σ	%	Σ	%	Σ	%
1	I listened to the presentation from the beginning to the end.	0	0	2	5.4	12	32.4	23	62.2
2	I understood all the material of my presentation.	1	2.7	18	48.6	18	48.6	0	0
3	I asked the presenter for the material that I do not understand.	13	35.1	8	21.6	15	40.5	1	2.7
4	The answer to the presentation adds to my understanding of the subject.	0	0	14	37.8	17	45.9	6	16.2
5	I listened to the additional explanations or clarifications given by the lecturer.	0	0	0	0	5	13.5	32	86.5
6	I understood all the additional explanations clarification given by the lecturer.	0	0	4	10.8	22	59.5	11	29.7
7	I recorded all additional explanations / clarifications given by the lecturer.	0	0	12	35.1	13	35.1	11	29.7

There were also three dominant in-classroom learning strategies applied by students (data in table 2 above). The first one is that almost all students listened to the presentation in classroom presented by their friends. However, some students did not fully understand the materials of presentation; this is of course a serious problem faced by students if the classroom activities were in the form of seminar. The second dominant in-classroom learning strategy used by the students is that they seriously listened to lecturer's additional explanation and clarification after the classroom seminar. It seems that the students were highly expecting to wait for the lecturer's additional explanation and theoretical confirmation. The third dominant in-classroom learning strategy used by the students is noting down all additional explanation and clarification seriously. The data indicate that some students were diligent to take notes and they felt that it was good to have good scores (marks) at the end of semester. In other side, the data and information obtained tell as well that they did not reread their notes or summaries at home. Unfortunately, some others did not make good notes and even few of them made no notes at all.

TABLE 3
STUDENTS' POST-CLASSROOM LEARNING STRATEGIES

No	statement	Selected Frequency							
		TP		JR		SR		SL	
		Σ	%	Σ	%	Σ	%	Σ	%
1	I read back to each lecture after the lecture.	9	24.3	20	54.1	8	21.6	0	0
2	I have completed lecture notes.	2	5.4	13	35.1	16	43.2	6	16.2
3	I read all the lecture notes as preparation for the exam.	0	0	6	16.2	9	24.3	22	59.5

For the students' post-classroom learning strategies, the learning problems obviously appeared. More than 70% students did not reread their notes and summaries after the class. They did finish the activities of taking notes, but they did not reread the notes once the class was over. The data also indicate that all students had lecturing notes and summaries in the forms of individual styles. However, they did not reread the notes in order to build and develop their perception on concepts, theories, and application of *Language Assessment* instruction. Other data tell that almost all students just read their notes for the preparation of examination as the midterm and final-term tests. These ways of the application of learning strategies are not academically and scientifically good and cognitively helpful for content-based instructions.

The data description and analysis as displayed above reveal that learners' problems and/or difficulties in understanding the content-based learning materials can be stated as the logical consequences of both inferior level of reading skill and inappropriate uses (choices) of learning strategies. They had not sufficient reading comprehension yet before they had to read reading passages of the content-based learning materials. Moreover, the learners did not use and apply the appropriate learning strategies in pre-classroom, in-classroom, and post-classroom activities. The conclusion is also empirically supported by qualitative data obtained through short direct-practical interview to the students decided as the informant for qualitative data. The learners did not use the metacognitive approach and metacognitive strategies in reading the content-based learning materials as recommended by Dhieb-Henia (2006) and Masuhara (Tomlinson, 2007).

Additional data used in this paper obtained by means of short direct-practical interview with 5 students tell that they faced serious problems dealing with linguistic features of reading text they were reading. There are, at least, three specific-linguistic features causing the EFL learners to get problems to optimally understand the reading passages of content-based learning materials. Problem of vocabulary is the first specific-linguistic feature which caused the learners' problem in understanding content-based learning materials. It is supposed that the learners did not have sufficient vocabulary mastery to read the passages used for content-based learning materials. The second specific-linguistic features causing the problems in reading the content-based learning materials is grammatical problems. The learners told that grammatical features in the levels of phrasal, clausal, and syntactical constructions in English made them face serious problems when they were reading. The next specific-linguistic feature which raised the problem in reading content-based learning materials is the problem of deriving and drawing relevant conclusions based on reading passages. This is a type of problems in discourse understanding. The learners were difficult to take main information delivered by the text.

The learners' learning strategies and problems in engaging in linguistic features used in the passages of content-based learning materials are logically supposed to bring about the academic problems. It is obvious that the specific-linguistic features used in passages are relevant with the contents and level of the passages. Based on the curriculum and syllabus used for *Language Assessment* subject at the English Department of NCBC Nanchang, it has been academically considered the content-based learning materials are appropriately used. The materials had been well selected to be suitably used for the level of students. As the candidates of EFL teachers, the learners have to read and understand the learning materials well. The linguistic factors are those of problems that should be overcome through academic efforts.

It may be argued in this paper that learners' learning strategies used in pre-classroom, in-classroom, and post-classroom activities gave significant influences to the EFL learners in understanding content-based learning materials. The inappropriate learning strategies habitually used and applied by the learners affected their level of comprehension on the content-based learning materials in two main ways. Firstly, the learning strategies habitually used by the learners cannot build and develop language awareness and textual understanding as the students did not prepare themselves before coming to the classroom. In addition, they did not activate their critical thinking and cognitive processes during the classroom activities because they were just waiting for lectures' explanation and having personal notes. This is more on academic and habitual problems in taking content-based subjects in general. Secondly, the learning strategies they used were operationally based on cultural behaviors of the learners. They did not want to move on other academic-intellectual learning habits. This point is more on problem of socio-cultural features and personal habits which are not relevant to use in the teaching processes at university level.

V. CONCLUSION

The EFL learners' problems in understanding content-based learning materials found at the English Department of NCBC Nanchang, are problems of both reading skill and learning strategies. In relation to the fact, it is necessary for the lecturer to inform to the students that suitable learning strategies give significant contribution to learning achievement. In addition, the students need to be ensured that the appropriate learning strategies should be variously applied in learning, not only for examination and scores, but also for better science and knowledge. This information is highly needed in order that the students gain a better understanding on the relevant concepts and theories of content-based instructions. It may be stated as well that the teaching learning processes of reading and writing skills should be reviewed and greatly developed in order that the students would have had essential reading and writing skills before learning content-based instructions.

The information and discussion about learning strategies, particularly about those which concern with language learning, should be informed and introduced to the students in order that they have perception on (language) learning strategies and are able to select and employ effectively for various learning instructions. It is also suggested to the principals of English Department and the lecturers as well to review, to revise, and to develop better teaching-learning processes of reading and writing skills. It is also necessary to improve students' motivation to learn English grammar and to add vocabularies as the methods to have better understanding on content-based instructions. The lecturers of content-based instructions need to select and use appropriate classroom methods and teaching techniques. The lecturers of content-based instructions have to design and develop structural-systematic tasks, homework, and particular assignments which make students to study seriously at home and in library. In addition, the learning programs assigned should make students learn independently.

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