

The Motivation to English Vocabulary Acquisition: A Comparative Study of English and Non-English Major Students in Vocational University

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Abstract

It is noticeable that the plethora of researches has investigated motivation to acquire English vocabularies only in general universities. There is still scarce research that compares the motivation of English vocabulary learning between English major and non-English major students in vocational university. Therefore, it is not known if students who choose to study English as their major differ from those who are required to study English as the minor component of their wider degree in vocational education.

Drawing on SDT, the study reports on the findings of a quantitative study designed to investigate the comparison in motivation for English vocabulary acquisition demonstrated by English major (n = 94) and non-English major students (n = 87) in a vocational university. The study revealed that both English major and non-English major students in vocational university tend to possess high levels of Identified Regulation (ID) and External Regulation motivation (EX) to acquire English vocabulary. English major students felt more intrinsically motivated and less mandatory to learn English.

This paper argues that it is imperative for lecturers in vocational university to assist students in internalising these External Regulation motivation (EX) to English vocabulary acquisition to prepare for their future profession, which contributes to fostering students' intrinsic aspirations to English vocabulary acquisition.

Key words: Self-determination theory; English vocabulary acquisition; Vocational university

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1. INTRODUCTION

Vocabulary learning is indispensable to second/foreign language learning. Mastering English vocabulary is conducive to promoting academic performance in English learning. However, it is tough for second/foreign language learners to accumulate abundant vocabulary if they lack motivation.

My experiences as an English teacher in a vocational university suggest that students' vocabulary acquisition is greatly affected by their motivations and for many of them, extrinsic motivation drives them to learn vocabulary. For instance, students are expected to pass CET-4 and CET-6¹ during their undergraduate years as the results of these tests can usually affect their employment.

The vocabulary sizes of CET-4 and CET-6 are 4500-5000 and 6000-7000 respectively. The vocational university reported a 50% pass rate for CET 4 and a 40% pass rate for CET Band-6 (citation). According to a survey conducted in classes that I taught, among the students who passed CET 4 and CET 6, 85% are motivated by finding a decent job after graduation.

Students' career goals can be shaped by broader social and economic contexts. With the rapid development of the Chinese economy and society, the requirements for high-quality workforce and highly skilled personnel in various industries are constantly improving. In 2019, the State Council issued the *implementation Plan of*

¹ The College English Test, better known as CET, is a national English as a foreign language test in the People's Republic of China. It examines the English proficiency of undergraduate and postgraduate students in China. It includes two levels: CET4 and CET6.

National Vocational Education Reform (IPNVER), which made vocational education a focal point for the Chinese government and represented a new milestone in the development of vocational education reform in China. Hence, diverse vocational universities emerged. Since vocational universities aim to equip students with practical abilities, they pay more attention to providing students with occupational orientation and equip students with proficient practical and technical abilities. Thus, students of vocational universities possess the target for acquiring the ideal job in the future. Due to occupational orientation in vocational universities, both English major and non-English major students in vocational university tend to possess high levels of extrinsic motivation to acquire English vocabulary.

Therefore, this study extended the previous research by examining the motivation to learn English vocabulary of both English major and non-English major students in a vocational university.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Previous studies on vocabulary learning

It is universally acknowledged that vocabulary is indispensable for Language learning. A plethora of research manifested that vocabulary is fundamental to language learning. According to the linguist D. A. Wilkins (1972), it is tough to present the perspectives effectively under the circumstance of lacking vocabulary. Ample studies have probed into the correlation between vocabulary and language learning, indicating that vocabulary acquisition is conducive to improving academic performance. Vocabulary with abundance is the essential prerequisite to four elementary skills of a language: listening, speaking, reading and writing. It is the cornerstone of language learning, and mastering vocabulary is relevant to gratifying academic performance (Read, 2000). The abundance of vocabulary is helpful in inferring meaning from English sentences and passages (Rupley, Logan, & Nichols, 1999).

Insufficient vocabulary often results in misunderstanding or poor comprehension of English texts (Lin, 2002; Segler, Pain, & Sorace, 2002). Some researchers maintained that the main obstacle in English learning is encountering completely new words in an English text (Anderson & Freebody, 1981; Mezynski, 1983; Qian, 2002). This problem is especially prominent among Second/foreign language learners in the use of language (Savadkouhi, 2013). Learners may find vocabulary acquisition difficult as vocabulary knowledge is a complex and multifaceted construct that involves numerous types of word knowledge components, including written knowledge, spoken knowledge, word parts, collocations, and associations, among others (Nation, 2013). Given the complex nature of vocabulary

knowledge, foreign language learners have been reported to be demotivated by the heavy burden of vocabulary learning (Kikuchi, 2009). Demotivation is especially common among Chinese English as a foreign language (EFL) learner, many of whom view vocabulary mastery as one of the greatest obstacles to language learning (Yang & Dai, 2011). Struggles in acquiring new vocabulary may persist throughout their educational careers and may result in a cycle of frustration and continued failure.

2.2 Previous studies on motivation to vocabulary learning

As illustrated above, a lack of vocabulary knowledge plays a pivotal role in learners' unsatisfactory academic performance in language acquisition for both foreign and second language learners. There are a variety of factors that may affect vocabulary acquisition, including age, gender, and time spent on vocabulary acquisition. Motivation exerts a paramount impact on vocabulary building. The term motivation has various definitions. Deci and Ryan's (1985) self-determination theory (SDT) is one of the most established frameworks for understanding motivation. According to SDT, motivation is broadly classified into three distinctions-intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation, and amotivation (Deci & Ryan, 2002). Intrinsic motivation is defined as the most self-determined distinction, referring to engaging in activities for the sake of enjoyment or out of pure interest. Extrinsic motivation pertains to behaviors performed for external factors other than inherent contentment. Extrinsic motivation includes integrated regulation, identified regulation, introjected regulation, and external regulation. The four types of extrinsic motivation are different in the degree of internalization or autonomy exhibited by learners. Among the four types of extrinsic motivation, integrated regulation is the most internalized or self-determined type of extrinsic motivation, followed by identified and introjected regulation, and external regulation is the least internalized or self-determined type of extrinsic motivation. Contrary to intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, which are both intentional, amotivation relates to scanty intention or drive to engage in an activity.

Another popular categorization of motivations is proposed by Gardner (1985). They argued that there are two basic types of motivation: integrative and instrumental. Integrative motivation pertains to language acquisition for personal growth and cultural enrichment, which means that the learner engages in learning a language to enter successfully into the target language society; Instrumental motivation, on the other hand, refers to orientation to language acquisition for functional or external reasons. The functional or external factors involve the attainment of aims, functional aims for learning like passing exams and financial rewards (1959 as cited in Pourhosein Gilakjani, Leong, & Saburi, 2012).

Though both these categorizations are useful tools to understand motivation, the SDT is a broader framework for understanding factors that facilitate or undermine intrinsic motivation, autonomous extrinsic motivation, and psychological wellness, all issues of direct relevance to educational settings. Hence, the study will adopt the SDT to analyze the motivation of English vocabulary acquisition.

Motivation is vital for vocabulary learning. Researchers have demonstrated the influential effect of motivation on vocabulary acquisition. Gardner and MacIntyre (1991) explored the role of motivation in the acquisition of French vocabulary and discovered that both integrative and instrumental motivation promoted vocabulary learning. Tanaka (2013) investigated the role of motivation in learning kanji with Chinese learners of Japanese and identified intrinsic motivation and introjected regulation as positive and negative predictors of kanji proficiency, respectively. Although these studies indicated the significance of motivation in vocabulary mastery, few studies focused on the role of motivation in English vocabulary learning.

Numerous studies explore the motivational types of students when learning English as a second/foreign language. According to Warden and Lin's (2000) survey study conducted in Taiwan, university student participants (N = 200) demonstrated high levels of motivation to acquire English to obtain instrumental benefits such as good jobs and low levels of intrinsic motivation. It is noticeable that a great number of participants reported that they were required to learn English.

In Bradford's (2007) quantitative study, university student participants (N = 168) reported high levels of extrinsic motivation and very low levels of integrative motivation to master English with the purpose to gain pragmatic benefits such as jobs and money rather than pursuing identity with English native communities. Turkey researcher mixed methods research (a survey with 523 university students, followed by focus groups with five students from 190 H. NGO ET AL. each faculty) confirmed a number of findings of the aforementioned studies conducted in the Southeast Asian region in that Turkish students demonstrated high levels of instrumental motivation and low levels of integrative motivation.

To sum, studies on motivation for vocabulary learning are necessary to be further explored.

2.3 Previous studies on comparison of motivation to English vocabulary learning between English major and non-English major students in vocational university

The rapid development of the Chinese economy and society has made vocational education a focal point of China's education reform. In 2002, the State Council released the *Decision on Vigorously Promoting the Reform and Development of Vocational Education* (Hao, 2012).

This initiative proposed the reform of the vocational education school system and formed a pluralistic governance structure led by the government as well as enterprises, industries, and social groups. Since then, diverse vocational universities emerged. In 2005, the State Council issued *the Decision on Vigorously Developing Vocational Education* which first put forward the concept of VE schools and enterprises binding together to carry out vocational education in the school system in a collective 'group' mode. In 2019, the State Council issued the *implementation Plan of National Vocational Education Reform (IPNVER)*, representing a new milestone in the development of vocational education in China.

These policy documents suggest that vocational education is becoming increasingly important in China's education system with the goal to cultivate highly skilled personnel for the expanding labor market. In other words, vocational universities are usually more occupation-oriented and thus pay more attention to the cultivation of students' practical skills, which may further affect students' motivations.

It is noticeable that the studies above investigated motivation to learn English among non-English major students only in general universities. There is still scarce research that compares the motivation of English vocabulary learning between English major and non-English major students in a vocational university.

a) Research questions

Therefore, this research seeks to answer the following questions.

b) What types of motivation do English major and non-English major students demonstrate when learning English vocabulary in a vocational university?

c) What are the similarities and differences in the motivation to learn English vocabulary between an English major and a non-English major in a vocational university?

4. METHOD

4.1 Participants

This study was conducted in a vocational university in China, which offers English courses for students whose subject areas are not directly related to the English language in the first two years of their four-year undergraduate study. Therefore, Non-English major student participants in this study were mainly from year 1. The English major students can be are sophomores from the same vocational university in China. Students were randomly selected and participated in the formal study.

4.2 Data Collection

Quantitative data were collected in 202311, to collect reliable information from the questionnaire survey, the study recruited first-year students. I approached three

English major classes I teach, containing roughly 94 students. Non-English majors mainly come from Business Management and a total number of 87 students were reached. Therefore, the total number of samples is 181.

Prior to completing the questionnaire, students were informed by their English teachers that their identities would remain confidential, and that their answers would be adopted only for the purposes of the current research. Students were arranged 15 minutes to complete the questionnaire on site.

The questionnaire was developed based on the Deci and Ryan's (1985) self-determination theory (SDT). The questionnaire consisted of four sections:

- Section 1: Intrinsic Motivation for English Vocabulary Acquisition (IM). Intrinsic Motivation section contains five items, which pertain to internal satisfying reasons to learn English vocabulary (e.g., 'I feel pleasure when I discover new things through acquiring English vocabulary').

- Section 2: Identified Regulation for English Vocabulary Acquisition (ID). It contains five items, The items represent the reason for learning English vocabulary in order to benefit individuals' future personal and professional development (e.g., 'English vocabulary is important to make my dreams come true.').

- Section 3: Introjected Regulation for English Vocabulary Acquisition. This section includes five items, which tap into learning English vocabulary to meet requirements and/or expectations from the universities or parents, lecturers, or to avoid negative feelings such as shame or guilt (e.g., 'I don't want my classmates to think that I am slow in acquiring English vocabulary compared to others.').

- Section 4: External Regulation for Learning English Vocabulary with five items. The items concern the reason for learning English vocabulary in order to satisfy external demand, achieve possible reward or avoid punishment. (e.g., 'I don't want to fail the English course.').

- Section 5: Amotivation for Learning English Vocabulary. Amotivation section contains five items, which pertain to not understanding a reason for obtaining English vocabulary (e.g., 'I don't know what I am getting out of acquiring English vocabulary.').

Participants were asked to rate the degree to which they disagree or agree with each statement on a 5-point likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Data collected from the questionnaire will be analyzed and further compared considering students' majors to develop an understanding of students' motivations and their impacts on students' performance.

4.3 Data Analysis

The questionnaire data were analyzed using SPSS to obtain descriptive statistics on comparison in motivation between English major and non-English major students. There are two independent variables which include

English major or non-English major and the five dependent variables which involve Intrinsic Motivation (IM), Identified Regulation (ID), Introjected Regulation (IJ), External Regulation (EX) and Amotivation (AM). Pearson correlation coefficients were then adopted to examine associations between independent variables (major) and five dependent variables (IM, ID, IJ, AM). The data satisfies assumptions for linearity, multicollinearity and multivariate outliers. Through the independent sample T test, the difference analysis of the five dependent variables between English majors and non-English majors was obtained, at the same time, the independent sample T test was adopted to analyze if the uni-variate F-tests for those variables were significant.

5. RESULTS

Table 1
Motivational Subtypes Among English and Non-English Major Students

| Variables | English major or Non-English major | Num. | Mean | SD | t | p |
|-----------|------------------------------------|------|------|------|--------|-------|
| IM | Non-English | 87 | 3.63 | 0.87 | -1.818 | 0.071 |
| | English | 94 | 3.84 | 0.68 | | |
| ID | Non-English | 87 | 3.82 | 0.90 | -2.085 | 0.038 |
| | English | 94 | 4.07 | 0.70 | | |
| IJ | Non-English | 87 | 3.15 | 0.94 | -0.607 | 0.544 |
| | English | 94 | 3.23 | 0.76 | | |
| EX | Non-English | 87 | 4.09 | 1.55 | -0.467 | 0.641 |
| | English | 94 | 4.18 | 0.89 | | |
| AM | Non-English | 87 | 2.11 | 1.02 | -1.518 | 0.131 |
| | English | 94 | 2.34 | 1.03 | | |

5.1 English major and non-English major students' motivation to English vocabulary acquisition in vocational university

As seen in Table 1, the mean score for all motivational subtypes fall between 1 (low level) and 5 (high level). As such, it can be indicated that English major students reported a moderate level of Introjected Regulation motivation (IJ) (M = 3.23, SD = 0.76), a moderately high level of Intrinsic Motivation (IM) (M = 3.84, SD = 0.68), a high level of Identified Regulation motivation (ID) (M = 4.07, SD = 0.70) and an extremely high level of External Regulation motivation (EX) (M = 4.18, SD = 0.89).

This result indicates that plentiful English major students mainly demonstrated four types of motivation, namely motivation to obtain English vocabulary to satisfy one's internal aspirations (IM), the motivation to acquire English satisfy external demand, achieve possible reward or avoid punishment (EX), the motivation to learn English vocabulary in order to benefit individuals' future personal and professional development (ID) and the motivation to learn English vocabulary to meet requirements and/

or expectations from the universities or family members, lecturers, or to avoid negative feelings such as shame or guilt(IJ). Among major types of motivation, External Regulation motivation and Identified regulation motivation occupy the top two places

Non-English major students showed a medium level of Introjected Regulation motivation (IJ) ($M = 3.15$, $SD = 0.94$), moderately high level of Intrinsic Motivation(IM) ($M = 3.63$, $SD = 0.87$), a high level of Identified Regulation motivation (ID) ($M = 3.82$, $SD = 0.90$) and a extremely high level of External Regulation motivation (EX) ($M = 4.09$, $SD = 1.55$).

Akin to their English major peers, non-English major students mainly demonstrated four major types of motivation: motivation to obtain English vocabulary to satisfy one's internal aspirations, the motivation to acquire English satisfy external demand, achieve possible reward or avoid punishment, the motivation to learn English vocabulary in order to benefit individuals' future personal and professional progress and the motivation to learn English vocabulary to meet requirements and/or expectations from the universities or family members, lecturers, or to avoid negative feelings such as shame or guilt. Among major types of motivation, the majority of English major students demonstrated the highest levels of External Regulation motivation to acquire English Vocabulary. The main two types of motivation shown by non-English major students are External Regulation motivation and Identified regulation motivation to acquire English Vocabulary.

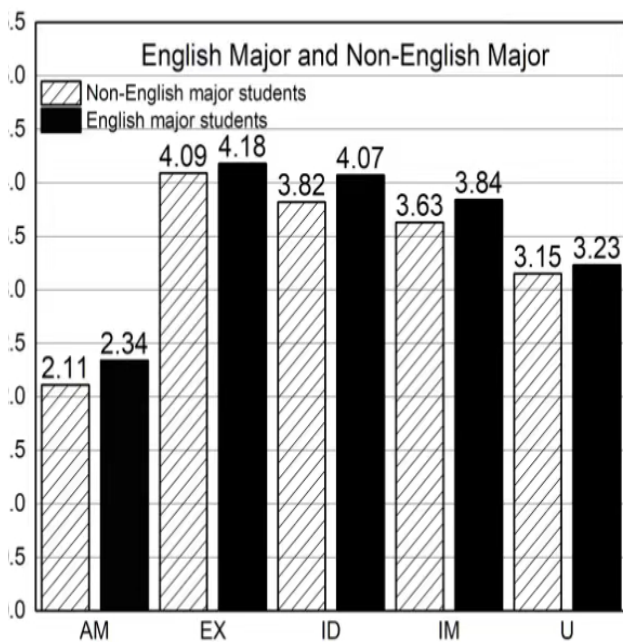


Figure 1
Motivational Factors Driving English Vocabulary Acquisition Among English Major Students in Vocational Universities

5.2 English major students' motivation to English vocabulary acquisition in vocational university

In the study, the majority of English major students mainly demonstrated five types of motivation to learn English vocabulary: Intrinsic Motivation (IM), Identified Regulation (ID), Introjected Regulation (IJ), External Regulation (EX) and Amotivation (AM).

According to these results, It is fairly safe to conclude that English major students were strongly motivated to acquire English vocabulary to satisfy external demand, achieve possible reward or avoid punishment. At the same time, students demonstrated to show a strong tendency to obtain English vocabulary in order to benefit individuals' future personal and professional progress. This situation can be explained considering the fact that vocational universities aim to equip students with practical abilities, they put emphasis on providing students with occupational orientation and equip students with proficient practical and technical abilities.

In order to implement the *implementation Plan of National Vocational Education Reform (IPNVER)* (Hao, Y. 2012)., and promote the quality of vocational education, the State Council proposed that vocational education should strengthen the practical teaching. In principle, practical teaching hours should account for more than 50% of the total ones. It is necessary to actively promote various internship methods, such as cognitive internships, follow-up internships, and on-the-job internships, and strengthen the assessment and evaluation of internship training with the goal of educating students. Through building and making good use of various practical training bases, vocational university can strengthen students' practical training. Thus, students of vocational universities possess the target for acquiring the ideal occupation in the future. Hence, English major students in vocational university tend to possess high levels of Extrinsic motivation and Identified Regulation motivation to acquire English vocabulary.

5.3 Non-English major students' motivation to English vocabulary acquisition in vocational university

Non-English major students demonstrated five major types of motivation which comprise Intrinsic Motivation (IM), External Regulation (EX), Identified Regulation (ID), Introjected Regulation (IJ) and Amotivation (AM). According to results in figure1, It is unexpected to discover that non-English major students, who are obligated to learn English, showed low levels of amotivation ($M=2.11$, $SD=1.02$) and moderately high level of Intrinsic Motivation (IM) ($M = 3.63$, $SD = 0.87$), a high level of Identified Regulation motivation (ID) ($M = 3.82$, $SD = 0.90$) and a extremely high level of External Regulation motivation(EX) ($M = 4.09$, $SD = 1.55$) for English Vocabulary Acquisition.

The finding above is inconsistent with the SDT. Based on SDT, when being obligated to participate in an activity, an individual may tend to feel highly mandatory and potentially lack motivation to tackle the assignment to great degree (Ryan and Deci 2002). The results of the study contrast sharply with the arguments of Warden and Lin (2000) as they emphasize that many Asian non-English major learners learn English vocabulary simply because it is a compulsory course.

The result may be explained by the fact that vocational university provides various practical training courses and conduct extensive social practice activities, among which English functions as a significant tool closely relevant to their major, non-English major students who show a great performance in English vocabulary acquisition have a great tendency to obtain opportunities to get access to the latest progress in their major field and make preparations for careers in future (Hadisantosa & Johnstone, 2010). Based on SDT, the condition described above contributes to alteration of students' motivation to English Vocabulary acquisition due to external factors (influence of university and teachers) and internal factors (individual growth and development). While students may feel mandatory to study English because they need to learn a foreign language outside of their major course, they may cultivate an interest in exploring related aspects of English unconsciously, including vocabulary acquisition, spoken English, even cultures in English countries (Deci and Ryan 1985).

5.4 Comparing English major students with non-English major students in their levels of motivation in vocational university

Figure 1 shows that English major and non-English major students demonstrated similarity in the sense that they both paid great attention to English vocabulary acquisition to obtain some instrumental benefits, including getting good English exam results or preparing for future careers as these benefits were perceived to be vital for them, with the fact that English major and non-English major students both reported moderately high level of Intrinsic Motivation(IM), a high level of Identified Regulation motivation(ID) and a extremely high level of External Regulation motivation(EX) for English Vocabulary Acquisition in Figure 1.

However, Table 1 manifests the difference in levels of motivation to English vocabulary acquisition between the English major and non-English major students' motivation to vocabulary acquisition. English major students reported higher level of Intrinsic Motivation (IM), Identified Regulation (ID), Introjected Regulation (IJ), External Regulation (EX) than non-English major students, especially for Identified Regulation. Figure 1 shows that the main effect of major in Identified Regulation at the multivariate level was statistically significant ($P=0.038$, $P<0.05$), manifesting that English major and non-English major student differed on their Identified Regulation motivation to English vocabulary acquisition.

On the one hand, vocational university aim to equip students with practical abilities, they attach importance to students' occupational orientation and proficient practical and technical abilities. Thus, students of vocational universities possess the target for acquiring the ideal occupation in the future. Due to occupational orientation in vocational universities, both English major and non-English major students in vocational university tend to possess high levels of Identified Regulation (ID) and External Regulation motivation (EX) to acquire English vocabulary.

On the other hand, since English majors have chosen English as their major, they are likely to be mentally and cognitively prepared for future studies. However, non-English majors have not chosen to learn English. When being required to acquire English vocabulary, non-English major students tend to lack motivation to English vocabulary acquisition (Le and Barnard 2009). Based on SDT, when an individual is able to make a choice of what they want to do and have the capability to perform the task, they complete the task voluntarily and enjoyably. Conversely, when being obligated to engage in a task, they tend to be mandatory to fulfill the task (Deci and Ryan, 2012). As such, we can fairly conclude that being able to choose to learn what they want to learn, as well as a sense of competence in learning English, may explain why English majors are less mandatory and show more passion in English vocabulary learning than their non-English major peers.

6. IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

The present study provides important practical implications to improve Chinese students' levels of English proficiency. Different from the preconceived notion of Chinese lecturers that a majority of Chinese English major students are intrinsically motivated to obtain English vocabulary; non-English major students have no motivation to English vocabulary acquisition. In this study, both English majors and non-English majors' students in vocational university are extrinsically motivated to learn English vocabulary (i.e., preparing for future careers and coping with external pressure from universities and lecturers).

However, due to the fact that vocational university attaches importance to students' occupational orientation and proficient practical and technical abilities. The study shows high level of Identified Regulation (ID) and External Regulation (EX). Based on SDT, intrinsic motivation tend to predict high levels of effort, a key factor conducive to L2 proficiency. As such, it is imperative for lecturers in vocational university to assist students in internalizing these extrinsic behaviors/values into the self-system (Deci and Ryan, 2012).

In a specific way, lecturers in vocational university need to pay attention to the combination of practical training

and autonomy cultivation, vocational university can combine regional characteristics and rely on international activity platforms, such as Jingdezhen Ceramics Expo, to provide students with practical training interpretation and courses. Practical training has greatly improved the students' practical ability in interpretation and translation, which contributed to promotion of confidence in English vocabulary acquisition correspondingly to a great degree. As such, students in vocational university may have a better understanding of importance of learning English vocabulary. Furthermore, lecturers need to support students' autonomy by adopting some English vocabulary strategies so that the passion for English vocabulary acquisition can be cultivated, which enables them to deeply and joyfully engage in the English vocabulary learning.

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