

Teacher Education Curriculum for Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language

Mohammad Attaran [1], Hu Yishuai [2]

[1] attaran@um.edu.my
Faculty of Education,
University of Malaya,
Malaysia

[2] Faculty of Education,
University of Malaya,
Malaysia

ABSTRACT

The worldwide growing demand of CFL (Chinese as a Foreign Language) teachers has many implications for both curriculum development and teacher education. Much evidence has shown more in-depth research is needed in the field of teaching Chinese as a foreign language (Tsong & Cruickshank, 2011). Studying in-service teachers' experience in curriculum of teacher education programs is a good point to initiate the exploration. This article investigated in-service teachers' perceptions on curriculums of preparation programs in Chinese higher education through the phenomenological method. Seven experienced teachers who graduated from CFL teacher preparation programs were involved in this study. The findings show that the participants think the curriculums of their preparation programs successfully construct the teachers' professionalism and teachers' identity, but the curriculums need to be more practical. The educators should also improve their teaching quality when they implement the curriculums. The findings also indicate that lacking of adequate teaching practicum might lead to the unsatisfactory performance of Chinese language teachers in the global context. To contribute to further study, suggestions are given for helping educators and curriculum makers improve the curriculum effectiveness of Chinese language teacher education programs.

Keywords: *Curriculum, teacher education, Chinese as a foreign language.*

INTRODUCTION

With the increasing number of speakers and users of Chinese around the world, learning Chinese as a Foreign Language (CFL) has become a global trend. According to Zhao and Huang (2010), more than 100 million people worldwide were expected to be learning Chinese as a foreign language in 2011. Even though Chinese language is an ancient language, teaching Chinese as a foreign language is a new field to explore. In order to meet the increasing demand for CFL teachers (teachers who teach Chinese as a foreign language), the discipline of teaching Chinese as a foreign language to speakers of other languages (TCSOL), had been established in Chinese higher education since 1985. The principal aim of the programs in this discipline is to prepare qualified CFL teachers (Zhao & Huang, 2010). By 2012, 285 universities in China were officially recognized for preparing qualified CFL teachers in undergraduate degree level or master degree level programs (Wang, Moloney, & Li, 2013). Nevertheless, many studies reported that one of the major factors hindering worldwide CFL learning is the shortage of qualified CFL teachers (Orton, 2011; Zhao & Huang, 2010). Moloney (2013) said CFL teachers trained in these programs have found it difficult to teach foreign learners effectively. The core challenge for CFL teachers is the disjunction between the training curriculum of CFL teachers and the requirements of overseas educational contexts (Duff & Lester, 2008; Wang et al., 2013).

Compared to research focusing on the difficulties and issues of CFL teaching in practical contexts, few studies have examined the curriculum of CFL teacher education to answer the question of whether the CFL

teacher education can well prepare pre-service teachers to meet the requirements in reality. Many researchers (Tsung & Cruikshank, 2011; Moloney, 2013) appealed to the urgent demand to examine the current curriculum for CFL teachers in Chinese higher education, because it determines the quality of Chinese teaching methodologies. Some researchers have interviewed the teachers about their difficulties in practical teaching contexts (Moloney & Xu, 2012; Wang & Kirkpatrick, 2012); however, very rarely does research investigate teachers' perceptions on teacher education. There is a global recognition that the success of any educational reform strongly relates to the teacher quality and performance (Yüce, Şahin, Koçer, & Kana, 2013). In this context, one of the critical methods of improving the quality of the CFL teachers is rethinking the curriculum of teacher education. This growing attention to CFL teacher education required a need for empirical research on teachers' experiences in teacher training programs.

Preparation Programs for CFL Teachers in Chinese Higher Education

Motivated by the growing demand for CFL teachers, CFL teacher training programs in Chinese universities have developed a systematic and standardized curriculum. Shi (2008) reported that more than 57% of training programs focus on four aspects of training, namely linguistic knowledge, foreign language teaching knowledge, literature and culture knowledge, and Chinese and foreign language abilities. With clear training objectives, four aspects of training modules are underpinned by corresponding courses. Moreover, most of the programs used the same text books as the main teaching materials in each module. Shi (2008) also said, rather than being concerned with the established curriculum design, most of programs should further develop their training models and teaching pedagogies. Because of lack of competitive features, the current training model and teaching pedagogies are difficult to meet the challenges of global education and diverse needs of CFL learners worldwide.

Schepens, Aelterman, and Vlerick (2009) concluded that five pedagogical traditions have been identified as influencing current teacher education, including the academic, practical, technological, personal and critical/social reconstructionist tradition. In the view of Britzman (2003), the preparation programs for CFL teachers in Chinese higher education still maintained the academic pedagogical tradition. Britzman (2003) described the teacher education with academic pedagogical tradition thus: the program provides the knowledge through a variety of fragmented courses, the pre-service teachers are expected to integrate the knowledge obtained from the program by themselves, then apply the theoretical knowledge to practice (cited in Schepens et al., 2009) In fact, with the academic pedagogical traditions, the pre-service teachers are less likely to develop practical competence for the teaching profession.

Teaching practicum is a key session for teacher training programs, because it provides a good amount of time for pre-service teachers to practice their teaching skills and reflect on their teaching in realistic educational settings (Fung, 2005). But there is a concern over the quality of teaching practicum in the CFL teacher training programs. According to Shi (2008), approximately 76.7% programs have contractual cooperating organization which could arrange pre-service teachers' practicum outside the campus; in contrast, 23.33% programs do not have contractual cooperation for providing organized teaching practicum opportunities. In addition, the requirements of teaching practicums are different from each other. For example, what activities will be involved? How are pre-service teachers be evaluated?

The quality of teaching practicum also relies on the implementation and limited conditions in reality. Current circumstances of teaching practicum reflect the emergent call for scientific regulation on requirement and evaluation of teaching practicum. Such structured teacher education programs have been found to be very ineffective in terms of preparing pre-service teachers for the teaching profession. This has been defined as a problem of pedagogy and failure to integrate theory with practice (Schepens et al., 2009). In accordance with Britzman's view (2003), Shi (2008) found out that training for CFL teacher has established the curriculum content, but more progress should be made to improve pre-service teachers' practical competence. Also, program evaluation and curriculum management need to be further improved. Training programs should enable graduates to become professional qualified Chinese teachers effectively, making effort to avoid losing the pre-service teachers who have professional educational background.

METHODOLOGY

Cho (2000) claimed that phenomenological research in education involves a different discovery of what is generally referred to as educational experience. The aim of phenomenology is to seek the meaning of the world and the basic meanings of objects (Selvi, 2008). Moreover, phenomenology does not predict anything before and during the research process; it is interested in an existing situation that is imaginative or a real-life experience. Selvi (2008) said that rather than the abstract experience of others, phenomenology focuses on an individual's first-hand experiences. It explains the meaning of things through an individual's perspectives and self-experiences.

Using the phenomenological research method, this study aims at acquiring an in-depth understanding of CFL teachers' perceptions and previous experiences in terms of the curriculum of teacher preparation programs in higher education. The research had a main question which proposed: What are CFL teachers' perception in terms of curriculum of preparation programs in Chinese higher education? Accordingly, one-on-one interview were conducted through Skype with seven participants, according to the participants' convenience. Using a purposeful sampling, seven experienced in-service CFL teachers who graduated from preparation programs were involved in this study. All participants have abundant experience in teaching CFL in practical contexts; they are now teaching CFL teachers in the international schools in China. They were asked questions about previous experience in terms of curriculum for pre-service teachers in higher education. The interviews were conducted in Chinese. With the purpose of data analysis, the interviews were audiotaped. In the process of data analysis, the interviews were transcribed and coded in Chinese then translated into English. The thematic data analysis was referred to the methods presented by Creswell (2002).

FINDINGS

The importance of linguistic knowledge

Wang et al. (2013) pointed out that the curriculum for CFL teachers in Chinese higher education paid too much attention on linguistic knowledge; it led to less attention given to pedagogy. But Orton (2011) confirmed that linguistic knowledge is the essential knowledge that CFL teachers should master. Orton (2011) said all native speakers of all languages have the same problem, including Chinese teachers who should be educated about the facts of their language, understand its learning challenges and know how to help learners to solve their language problems.

Four participants started from recounting their experiences in Chinese linguistic lectures. Their experiences in studying Chinese linguistics explicate the central role of linguistic knowledge in curriculum content. Participants' attitude toward the study of Chinese linguistic confirmed that the curriculum equipped the CFL teacher with professionalism. Five participants identified the linguistic knowledge played a very important role in curriculum for pre-service CFL teachers.

"I was a novice in CFL teaching, I didn't know which grammar we should teach. A person can speak Chinese doesn't mean he can teach Chinese from linguistic aspect. For example "白 (bai)" is an adverb needed to be taught in intermediate learners, people without CFL teacher education background would not be able to know this is a grammar for CFL learners, because if I didn't have experience in CFL teacher training I would have had no idea like other native speakers." (T1)¹

As one of the participants remarked:

"The study of Chinese linguistic knowledge was helpful when you were developing your pedagogies for CFL. It is essential to have Chinese linguistic knowledge for pre-service CFL teachers... The curriculum, the study, firstly, primarily taught us to know your native language in linguistics perspective, and then think about teaching Chinese as foreign language in pedagogy's perspective." (T7)

One participant thought the curriculum contained useful professional knowledge for practical teaching

¹ Teacher one

contexts.

"I find out that most of knowledge we are using in practical teaching context could be found in the previous learning experience. It makes me easy to start and adapt to the practical teaching and new environment."(T6)

According to Boote (2006) a key concept is teachers' professional discretion, which requires the teacher to be able to make professional judgments on a particular task. A couple of examples here proved that the study of linguistic knowledge contributes to CFL teachers' professional discretion. And there is relevance of knowledge in curriculum to practical knowledge needed in real contexts.

Impractical content in the curriculum

Compared to the agreement on the significance of Chinese linguistics, the studies of several subjects were described as impractical by the participants. The main concern is that the subjects were not connected closely to the CFL teaching and learning context. These theory-centered courses did not help pre-service teachers to understand the practical teaching in reality.

"The courses provided by this curriculum mainly focus on theoretical discourses, the curriculum didn't bridge the theory to practice. I didn't know how I could apply the knowledge to practice. Some courses like History of Western Philosophy, History of Chinese Ancient Literature, I was not sure whether the knowledge would be used in the future." (T2)

The participant said the curriculum does not closely relate to practical teaching in reality.

"Apart from focusing on Chinese linguistics, the curriculum should teach us how to do teach Chinese as foreign language to foreigners. They mentioned critical principles of teaching CFL, but that mention is not enough, and lacks . . . examples to interpret how these principles will be applied in practice, this is very important for pre-service teachers before they teach in the real classrooms." (T2)

Another example shows that the curriculum is not as practical as participants expected. One participant said the curriculum content could not respond to his difficulties in practical teaching situations; he felt that TCSOL is a discipline, but the subjects within this discipline are detached. The practical skills have not been included in the curriculum.

"There is a course called The Grammar of Chinese as Foreign Language. This course aimed at providing professional knowledge to pre-service teachers, but even [if] I have been clear about grammar, I don't know how to teach this grammar to foreign students, it's impossible use the way I was taught, it is complicate to explain in Chinese, how a foreign student is supposed to understand it? Then I thought I had to find answer in the teaching methodology Class, but the methodology lecture only taught you the method generally, like categories of teaching methods for grammar" it was too general, [it] didn't include specific teaching strategies. Eventually, there are many questions about particular grammar teaching, you can't find answers in your study, and I learnt you have to conclude by yourself, learn by yourself, the answer isn't in the book or lecture." (T5)

Lecturers were only responsible for their own area; the curriculum does not require the course design to combine with the practical CFL teaching situation, leaving the disjunction between the subjects for students to fill by themselves. This kind of situation is consistent with the description of "academic education" mentioned above which Britzman explained in 2003.

Unsatisfactory teaching quality

Teaching quality of CFL teacher education is another concern expressed by participants in the interview. One participant said: *"Some teachers just transmitted the content from the textbook; some of teachers just read it. We rarely learnt the latest, new information and teaching experience with our teachers."*

(T2)

Three participants have the same comments, that they did not understand some courses they took in the university. They felt they did not really understand the situation they would face in the future, their study in the universities was not in light of the understanding of CFL teaching at that time.

"In the university, I felt like we learn a lot of courses, in a broad range, but I still didn't know much about the CFL teaching. Only understand some of course, for some course we didn't understand how that course would connect to the real teaching in the future. I studied hard in the university, but all my understanding are based on the textbook and lecture. The size of lecture is very large; the quality of teaching was not satisfactory. In this kind of environment, the quality of teaching and studying is limited, no interaction and differentiation in the university, we didn't have much questions that time, I just went to the lecture and went back to the dormitory, and I think I didn't know what was the real meaning of CFL teaching at that time." (T6)

One participant shared his special experience as follows:

"I learn the same courses twice or three times with different teachers, first time I learn these courses in the university, and afterwards in training for in-service teachers. The training content is partly similar to the content in the university, but much higher teaching quality than university. I was impressed by second training opportunities. I felt trainers' systematical teaching give me the first authentic understanding of TCSOL's history and framework. These experiences reinforced my opinion about teacher's crucial role in the education, different teachers would give you different insights and influences on students."(T4)

The experiences in various lectures were primarily talked about. Lectures, according to the participants' narrative, normally take place in amphitheatres, which means students from more than one class study the same course together. These large size lectures are regarded as a convenient and economical way of organizing teaching and learning in the university. Due to limitation of resources and conditions in China, the large class size lectures accommodate more students, and transmit the knowledge to large audiences with efficacy. Under this circumstance, students are passive recipients of knowledge. The disadvantages of large class size lectures limit the quality of teaching and pre-service teachers' understanding in the process of education. Apart from lectures, other training models or pedagogies were seldom mentioned by participants. It reflects the dominant place of lectures in training programs.

Three participants all mentioned several times that their understanding of CFL teaching was limited in the university. Although the curriculum of CFL teacher education has clarified what knowledge, attitudes, behaviors and skills teachers should possess, the empirical pedagogies in the lecture lack promotion of reflective practice. Clarke (2009) said it is widely accepted that reflective practice contributes to the quality of student experience and student learning in higher education. Without reflection, students are unable to create situations which allow learners to make their own meanings. Teachers' pedagogies should let students think of knowledge as something created individually, actively constructed from their own experiences, not as simply pre-digested, easily transmitted knowledge from teacher to student. Therefore, it is necessary to encourage more research in the aspects of the pre-service teachers' view of the content and pedagogies of the curriculum to improve teaching quality.

Inadequate teaching practicum

Fung (2005) said with the theoretical understandings of teaching, pre-service teachers can practice their teaching skill and develop their understanding of education in school. Through the reflective process, the pre-service teachers could achieve the required standards of teaching competencies. Therefore, teacher education is supposed to contain a good amount of time spent in teaching practicum. However, based-on participants' interview, the teaching practicum for CFL teachers is obviously inadequate.

"The teaching practicum organized by our university is taking you to observe the Chinese class for international students in our university, and watching the teaching video. But watching is completely

different with the teaching, when you teach, you need to practice organize then conduct the teaching, but teaching skill can't be studied from watching.”(T5)

Observing and watching teaching activities had been used in teacher preparation with a long history, but it is required to be combined with professional mentoring and scientific organization, and it cannot be replaced with the teaching practicum in the classroom.

“Teaching is a job which is emphasized to be implemented practically. But the curriculum didn't arrange enough time on teaching practicum, empirical practice session. I think the curriculum didn't meet the need of pre-service teachers. Teaching skills, like how to teach practically, conduct lesson based on the real text book, interact with my students, different teaching activities, so many things....You only can learn through practicum.” (T2)

In the process of interview, four participants talked about their part-time job experiences. Because they felt that the teaching practicum in the university was inadequate for them, they tried to look for more chances to practice their CFL teaching skills. Part-time CFL teaching job became a supplementary way to solve their problem.

“Learning combined with practicum helps me develop my teaching skill. I tried to look more chances to teach practicum. Then I could practice things to get my own conclusion, develop practical opinion on CFL in the reality. At the same time, I found there are many things I could not learn it from book, for example, the process of teaching and learning. Due to these chances I taught many students with diverse level and various backgrounds. The whole process is rich and colorful.” (T3)

Participants who had part-time jobs experiences all emphasized the positive effect of their experiences. They felt these were beneficial in many aspects.

“I was motivated by the part-time teaching job. During this process I tried to think [of] the specific methods to improve my teaching. The training in the workplace is more impressive than education in the university, the content of training was intimately connected to empirical teaching. Part-time job means to me like teaching practicum. Based on the question from daily teaching practicum, it pushes you to search answer from the book, read book, ask help from experienced people, and this experience made me convinced I love being a CFL teacher.”(T2)

Teaching practicum is considered as one of the most important components of teacher preparation with the greatest impact on teacher quality (Tang, 2003). It shapes pre-service teachers' beliefs and thinking about teaching. The participants in this study had to take off-campus practicum as an alternative method to practice their teaching skill.

Professional identity of teachers who teach Chinese as foreign language

This study found that the curriculum of CFL teacher education successfully constructed the teachers' professional identity. This concept refers to what teachers themselves find important in their professional work and lives based on their own experiences and their personal backgrounds (Tickle, 2000). Four teachers articulated they “love this job”, and other teachers all expressed they are fond of fields related to teaching Chinese as a foreign language, such as Chinese culture, history and ancient Chinese literature. The following quotes reflect their passion when they chose to be CFL teachers:

“When I was learning, I found the direction of my career, identify the job I want to do. I love it and [am] interested it, so I am willing to do it continually in the future; the most important is to know what job is most appropriate for me.”(T3)

Most of the participants were passionate about being CFL teachers as a long-term career. Their diverse experiences reflect the efforts they made to achieve the objective of career planning. They all expressed that their interest in CFL teaching has been enhanced in the process of the education and eventually they determined to be CFL teachers as their career.

DISCUSSION

Based on the findings, the CFL teacher education curriculum needs to be continually shaped for practicality. Participants view that CFL teaching is an independent discipline, but the subjects within this discipline are detached. Even though all the professional educators are experienced, they were only responsible for their own limited field. Participants expressed they learnt theoretical knowledge more than practical methods that they can directly apply in daily teaching. Crucial components of language teachers' education normally contain content in applied linguistics, theories of second language acquisition, assessment, methodology, and cultural aspects of language learning (Duff & Lester, 2008). The current CFL teacher education curriculum contains all these areas. An integrated curriculum, however, means the curriculum needs to be designed in a holistic way.

With the advanced increasing changes in the focus of CFL learning, teachers' education should be improving as well. The initiative step could be taken from renewing the subject and content of curriculum, balancing the theoretical knowledge and practical knowledge, adopting diverse pedagogies, updating the sharp-edged development of CFL teaching in the global context, which would help with developing a more practical curriculum. Many experiences from other contexts are instructive. For example, teacher education programs in North America stress problem-based learning and case studies of effective teaching. Pre-service teachers learn to make teaching plans and associate these teaching plans with actual objectives in the curriculum and textbooks used by the school, as well as assessment procedures. That means concrete examples of language lesson plans are an important part in the teaching methodology course (Duff & Lester, 2008). It can be found that pre-service CFL teachers spend less time working on such problem-based learning in programs. Curriculum designers should take into account multi-dimensional CFL teaching development.

In this study, participants account for the positive effects of linguistic study in the curriculum. Wang et al. (2013) reported that CFL teacher education in China gives more time to linguistics knowledge study and less focus on the pedagogies for CFL teaching. However, most participants explained the linguistics study made them understand the significant difference between teaching Chinese as first language and teaching Chinese as foreign language. They are confident that linguistic knowledge of CFL teaching solidified their professional competency. Duff and Lester (2008) confirmed that an effective language teacher should be able to produce or modify language according to the students' current language ability and understanding. Empirically, requirement for CFL teaching varies in the worldwide context. The linguistic knowledge background initially prepared the CFL teachers' professionalism. The participants' narrative of this study highlighted that linguistic knowledge is an indispensable part of CFL teachers' professionalism. Without the qualified and professional competency, it is impossible for CFL teachers to succeed in teaching in realistic contexts.

In addition, participants revealed that the teaching practicum in CFL teacher education is inadequate. Hascher, Cocard, and Moser (2004) found that the defectively designed teaching practicum can lead to teachers' resignation. Duff and Lester (2008) said that the development of language teachers is a combination of socio-affective and cognitive aspects of learning. In education programs, teachers need opportunities to reflect meaningfully on their own experiences as students who were taught languages, using different methods; they must observe excellent models of teaching, and they must have opportunities to apply theory to practice in their own teaching with assistance and feedback from experienced teachers and peers. Therefore, practicing teaching in the real setting cannot be replaced by other activities, and it needs to be well-designed. Scientific structure of teaching practicum for CFL teachers is essential.

According to Hascher et al. (2004), pre-service teachers in Swiss programs have three times practicum of teaching which take place in the introductory, intermediate, and final period of programs. With different orientation at each stage, the practicum consist of observation lessons, cooperative lessons and autonomous lessons. In the Swiss system, at the end of the practicum pre-service teachers and mentors evaluated their subjective progress in professional development in terms of professional skills, professional attitudes and self-assuredness. Zeichner (2010) suggested that teaching practicum can be a

time for growth where pre-service teachers come to understand the broader roles of school teachers for professional learning and teacher education. Therefore, scientifically designed teaching practicum means allocating adequate time to ensure provision of more opportunities for CFL teachers to interrogate their coursework knowledge, theories and assumptions about teaching and learning. Pre-service teachers also need to examine their classroom practices and social-professional relationships and experiences during teaching practicum.

In the study, four participants talked about their part-time job teaching experienced outside the universities. They are dissatisfied with inadequate practicum in the curriculum. The participants believed they practiced the knowledge they have learnt and enhanced their understanding of CFL as a career. The off-campus teaching practicum, like out-of-class activity, as a social experience, largely influenced students' beliefs, values and patterns of behavior (Yang & Chau, 2011). Positive influences on participants enhance the result of Yang and Chau's research in 2013; both academic and social competence were influenced in this process. However, the off-campus teaching practicum lacks standard and instruction. To solve this problem, deeper collaboration must be worked out between universities and schools. Taking programs in Switzerland as an example, supervisors at the university monitor the practicum, but the responsibility for the practicum is handed to the mentors in school. Furthermore, a practicum is strongly shaped by the school reality, for example, the curriculum, school activities, and so forth. Pre-service teachers not only need to apply basic didactic and methodical knowledge, but also need to become acquainted with school life in general (Hascher et al., 2004). Therefore, a well-designed, supervised teaching practicum must have experienced and well-informed teachers willing to provide mentoring, constructive feedback, and suggestions.

Fung (2005) suggested that teaching practicum is not only for student teachers to practice the teaching skills they have learned in their teacher education program; it is the continuation of teacher education in another setting. Many factors are involved in this process. Teaching practicum is not a simple matter. Hence universities should cooperate with more schools which are appropriate for pre-service teachers' practicum, to some extent to solve the problem in learning and practice and to understand the real situation of CFL teaching in the multi-cultural context. Therefore, it is necessary for educators and policy-makers to engage in concerted efforts to address some of the challenges of teaching practicum. In cooperation with appropriate schools, supportive and collaborative relationships with mentors should be arranged during teaching practicum. More studies are suggested to explore facilitation of the CFL teaching practicum in the future.

Finally, the other significant finding is what curriculum of CFL teacher education successfully constructed the teachers' professional identity. Teachers' professional identity is important in the sense that it is believed to strongly determine how teachers teach, how they develop professionally and how they approach educational changes (Schepens et al., 2009). Schepens et al. (2009) claimed that the new pedagogy of realistic teacher education is not focused on teaching teachers to "know" a lot about teaching, but to help them "become" good teachers who understand themselves as teachers involving personal and professional change. Duff and Lester (2008) also suggested that to become effective teachers now is understood to be a highly interactive, reflective, constructive, experiential process of professional socialization and of developing one's own competencies, beliefs, skills and identity as a language teacher. Few previous studies have involved the professional identity of the CFL teachers. New knowledge gained in this respect would respond to the call for improving the professional development of CFL teachers.

CONCLUSION

This phenomenological study investigated the existing situation in CFL teacher education. Although many researchers have called for in-depth study of issues of CFL teaching and improving the CFL teacher education around the world, very few studies have explored the CFL teachers' experience. Among several important findings of this study, some findings contradict the views of previous studies. The current curriculum is excellent in preparing CFL teachers' professionalism and construction of teachers' identity. Some findings of this study specified the issues presented in the past studies. The study found that lack of competitive features and well-designed teaching practicum are the main factors leading to poor

performance of CFL teaching in the global context. The authentic teachers' prior experiences are encouraging the new insight of discussions to improve the quality of curriculum and effectiveness of CFL teacher education.

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