

TEACHERS' CHALLENGES IN PROMOTING INTERCULTURAL AWARENESS IN SPEAKING SKILLS INSTRUCTION

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ABSTRACT

Intercultural awareness has become increasingly vital in English language training, particularly in speaking skills, as globalization needs successful communication across many cultural contexts. Despite its theoretical importance, many teachers still experience difficulties in integrating intercultural elements into classroom instruction. This study aims to investigate the lived experiences of Indonesian English teachers in promoting intercultural awareness within speaking education, focusing on the challenges they encounter and the strategies they employ to overcome them. The study is significant because it provides contextual insights into intercultural speaking instruction in Indonesian senior high schools, an area that remains underexplored in previous research. Using a qualitative phenomenological approach, data were collected through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis involving four English teachers at a private senior high school in Yogyakarta. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring themes related to teachers' experiences. The findings revealed several challenges, including limited teacher confidence and intercultural knowledge, insufficient professional development, lack of culturally diverse teaching resources, curriculum constraints, student disengagement, and the persistence of stereotypes and misconceptions. Despite these challenges, teachers attempted to promote intercultural awareness through digital media, group discussions, peer interaction, and collaborative activities. This study contributes to the existing literature by demonstrating that challenges in intercultural speaking instruction are strongly influenced by structural and institutional conditions rather than solely by individual teacher limitations. In conclusion, intercultural awareness can be systematically developed through improved teacher preparation, continuous professional development, adequate resources, and stronger institutional and curricular support.

Keywords: English Language Instruction; Intercultural Awareness; Phenomenological Approach; Speaking Skills; Teachers' Challenges

INTRODUCTION

In this age of globalization, English language education has changed from its traditional focus on grammar and vocabulary. An increasing amount of research stresses how important it is to be aware of other cultures as a key part of language learning, especially when it comes to teaching speaking skills. Intercultural awareness is the ability to perceive, accept, and adapt to different cultural points of view while having meaningful conversations. This skill is especially important for speaking, as students often have to deal with cultural variations in real time. Corbin Dwyer (2019) emphasizes that equipping students for global communication necessitates not merely linguistic proficiency but also cultural sensitivity. Concurrently, Deardorff (2020) and Guerriche (2023) underscore intercultural competence as fundamental to cultivating global citizenship and preparedness for intercultural engagement. So, including intercultural awareness in

speaking lessons helps students learn more than just language; it also helps them become more empathetic, inclusive, and understanding of the world around them (Elbah, 2022).

The theoretical foundations of intercultural awareness are derived from the notion of communicative competence, which posits that effective communication necessitates not only grammatical precision but also a comprehension of the cultural and social settings in which language is employed. Expanding on this viewpoint, learners are characterized as “cultural mediators” tasked with reconciling their own cultural viewpoints with those of the target language. Byram's (2020) significant model of intercultural communicative competence (ICC) further developed this perspective by highlighting the importance of cultural knowledge, interpretive and relational abilities, openness and curiosity, and critical cultural awareness. These frameworks emphasize the necessity for learners to participate in conscious intercultural communication instead of merely emulating native speakers (Susilo, 2022; Su, 2022). Li (2023) and Kristanti (2023) are two critics of native-speaker norms who say that trying to speak like a native speaker might hurt learners' identities and doesn't help them get ready for real intercultural interactions. As a result, modern language education places greater emphasis on adaptation, reflexivity, and mutual respect rather than rigid linguistic conformity.

Speaking teaching is a particularly important setting for fostering intercultural understanding. Speaking typically demands quick answers and the capacity to understand meaning on the spot, especially when people from different cultures are talking to each other. This is different from reading and writing. Researchers like Mustafida (2021) and Thai & Nguyen (2022) support speaking assignments based on real-life projects that help students think about and connect with cultural differences. Role-playing, storytelling, and group conversations are among activities that help people become more aware of other people's points of view. Liu (2023) discovered that incorporating cultural elements into speaking instruction improves students' capacity to embrace diverse perspectives, while Duff (2019) asserts that culture-oriented speaking activities not only enhance fluency but also foster adaptability and intercultural awareness. These studies collectively emphasize that speaking teaching must transcend mere accuracy to foster communicators who are socially and culturally adept.

Even if more and more people agree on this, intercultural awareness is still not a big part of English-speaking teaching in many places, including Indonesia. Teachers frequently depend on obsolete and linguistically restricted materials that inadequately

consider cultural diversity (Chong et al., 2022). When culture is discussed, it is often only on the surface, focusing on things like traditional clothing or food instead of fundamental values, beliefs, and worldviews (Hasymi & Nurkamto, 2023). Moreover, educators could feel ill-equipped to conduct intercultural dialogues owing to inadequate personal experience or insufficient professional training. Halim (2023) discovered that less than 10% of language textbooks include significant intercultural issues, hence limiting educational and pedagogical prospects. This lack of integration makes it harder for students to have meaningful intercultural conversations and makes language study seem less relevant to real-life social situations (Fernández-Benavides et al., 2023).

A variety of institutional and pedagogical issues further hinder the fostering of intercultural sensitivity in speaking teaching in Indonesia. Aldizeeri (2023) and Steele & Leming (2022) found that speaking assignments frequently don't have much cultural depth since they use scripted dialogues instead of helping students develop real communication skills. Students are infrequently encouraged to contemplate the influence of cultural norms on speaking acts, like making requests or articulating dissent. Ahmed & Qasem (2019) and Darmansyah (2019) indicate that more than 60% of educators feel inadequately equipped to teach intercultural content, resulting in the evasion of such subjects. At the systemic level, inflexible curricula and assessment frameworks offer minimal opportunities for new pedagogical approaches or the incorporation of varied cultural elements. These obstacles hinder even the most dedicated educators from properly applying intercultural education, exacerbating the disparity between policy aspirations and classroom realities.

Prior research has underscored the theoretical significance of intercultural awareness; however, limited studies have investigated how teachers personally navigate the hurdles of incorporating it into speaking training (Braslauskas, 2021). Most research concentrates on theoretical frameworks of intercultural competency or learner outcomes, with insufficient emphasis on educators' viewpoints and classroom methodologies. This neglect results in significant inquiries remaining unresolved regarding how educators manage conflicts among pedagogical objectives, curriculum requirements, and the complexities of culturally diverse classrooms (Gashi, 2021). Moreover, there is a scarcity of studies examining the practical tactics employed by teachers to surmount obstacles, particularly in resource-limited settings like Indonesia (Ayunon & Haloc, 2021). Therefore, the novelty of this research lies in its focus on teachers' firsthand experiences

and practical classroom realities in promoting intercultural awareness within speaking instruction. Unlike previous studies that primarily emphasize theoretical perspectives or students' intercultural competence, this study specifically investigates the challenges faced by teachers and the strategies they propose based on their own teaching experiences. In addition, by examining these issues within the context of an Indonesian senior high school, this research contributes contextual and practical insights to an area that remains underrepresented in the existing literature, thereby offering a more comprehensive understanding of how intercultural awareness can be effectively integrated into speaking instruction.

MATERIALS AND METHOD

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological approach because the research aimed to explore teachers' lived experiences in incorporating intercultural awareness into speaking instruction. Phenomenology is appropriate for understanding how individuals perceive, interpret, and give meaning to their experiences in a particular phenomenon. In this study, teachers experienced various challenges related to cultural diversity, classroom interaction, and curriculum demands; therefore, this approach enabled the researcher to gain an in-depth understanding of their perceptions, experiences, and proposed solutions. In addition, phenomenology emphasizes participants' subjective experiences and allows the researcher to collect rich and contextualized data through interviews, observations, and document analysis. As explained by Creswell (2013), van Manen (2016), and Zahavi (2019), phenomenology is useful for uncovering the essence of participants' experiences from their own perspectives, making it the most suitable approach for this research.

The participants were selected through purposive sampling and consisted of English teachers experienced in teaching intercultural classrooms. An international senior high school in Yogyakarta was chosen as the research site because its multicultural learning environment provided rich opportunities for intercultural interaction in speaking instruction. The school's diverse student backgrounds and international-oriented curriculum made it a relevant setting for investigating teachers' experiences, challenges, and strategies in promoting intercultural awareness.

The data were gathered using semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis. Semi-structured interviews were chosen because they allowed participants to describe their experiences, perspectives, and challenges in detail while still enabling the researcher to guide the discussion based on the research objectives. The interview guide, adapted from Lavania and Nor (2020) and Gibbs (2023), consisted of ten

main questions focusing on teachers' perspectives on intercultural awareness, classroom practices, challenges, and possible solutions. Interviews were conducted in Bahasa Indonesia and later translated into English. Classroom observations provided direct evidence of teaching practices and teacher–student interactions, while lesson plans and teaching materials were analyzed to support and validate the interview and observation findings.

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, as proposed by Braun and Clarke (2022). Thematic analysis was selected because it enabled the researcher to systematically identify, organize, and interpret recurring patterns and meanings across the collected data. The procedure involved initial, axial, and selective coding to develop major themes related to teachers' challenges and potential solutions in promoting intercultural awareness. Triangulation through interviews, observations, and document analysis, together with researcher reflexivity and detailed coding records, ensured the credibility and rigor of the findings.

RESULTS

The findings of this study elucidate the difficulties encountered by English teachers in fostering intercultural awareness through speaking instruction, along with the techniques employed to mitigate these issues. The study was place in a well-known private senior high school in Yogyakarta that is noted for its strong academic standards and has roughly 225 students from different ethnic backgrounds.

Most students still speak English as a second language, even if they come from different backgrounds. There aren't many chances for students to engage with people from other cultures outside of class. With 15 to 20 students in each class and teachers in charge of more than one group, it is both necessary and difficult to include intercultural awareness in speaking sessions.

Data were gathered via classroom observations and semi-structured interviews with five English teachers. To protect privacy, the individuals are labeled as T1, T2, T3, and T4. The next part shows what these statistics showed.

Table 1. Description Research Subjects

Subject	Gender	Age	Experience in Teaching English	Experience in Integrating Intercultural Awareness	Educational Background
T1	Male	35	7 years	7 years	Bachelor in English Education
T2	Female	40	10 years	5 years	Master in English Education

T3	Male	38	9 years	5 years	Bachelor in English Education
T4	Female	42	12 years	7 years	Master in English Education

The resulting themes and codes on teachers' challenges in promoting intercultural awareness in speaking instruction are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Themes and Codes: Teachers' Challenges in Promoting Intercultural Awareness

No	Themes	Codes
1	Teachers Confidence and Knowledge Gaps	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Expressed understanding of cultures outside their region. - Lacked confidence despite prior seminars or informal learning.
2	Limited Knowledge or Training	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Relied on self-study due to no formal training. - Found formal training too theoretical with minimal practical use.
3	Lack of Teaching Resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Difficulty finding materials about Indonesian cultures in English lessons. - Limited access to diverse cultural resources.
4	Student Engagement and Interest	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Some students found content irrelevant or disengaging. - Students hesitated due to limited vocabulary or discomfort.
5	Stereotypes and Misunderstandings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Students held stereotypes or rejected differences. - Misunderstood cultural practices or viewed them with bias.
6	Curriculum Limitations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Noted lack of intercultural sources in national curriculum.

The findings are presented based on the two research questions.

Challenges that teachers face in promoting intercultural awareness.

Internal Factors

Teacher's Confidence and Knowledge Gaps

During the interviews, teachers were asked about their confidence in integrating intercultural awareness into lessons. Some reported feeling less confident. T3 admitted lacking confidence due to limited knowledge of cultures outside their region, stating, "I lack confidence because I still don't understand some cultures from other regions in

Indonesia.” This suggests that limited cultural understanding can hinder teachers’ ability to effectively promote intercultural awareness.

In contrast, T1 expressed moderate confidence, supported by prior training, but noted difficulty in helping students fully grasp the importance of appreciating cultural diversity: “The main challenge is how to make students truly understand the importance of appreciating cultural diversity.” This indicates that even confident teachers struggle to foster deeper student awareness.

Classroom observations supported these points. In T3’s class, students engaged in storytelling but hesitated to discuss unfamiliar cultural topics. In T1’s class, the teacher confidently encouraged cultural comparisons, yet some students remained passive, showing a gap between instruction and student understanding.

Limited Knowledge or Training

During interviews, teachers were asked about training or support related to intercultural awareness in language teaching. T3 and T4 reported having no formal training and relying instead on self-study. T3 shared, “I have never received any formal training, but I learned by myself from various sources,” and T4 similarly noted learning independently through the internet and textbooks. This shows their initiative to build knowledge despite limited institutional support.

T1, on the other hand, had attended a short seminar but found it insufficient, stating that it “lacked practical guidance.” This indicates that available training was mostly theoretical and did not provide concrete classroom strategies, leaving teachers underprepared for integrating intercultural awareness into speaking lessons.

Classroom observations reinforced these findings. T2 and T3 used their own approaches, such as open discussions and storytelling, but lacked clear intercultural frameworks. T4’s role-play activities showed creativity, yet some cultural portrayals remained superficial, suggesting that without proper training, teachers struggle to guide students in deeper intercultural learning.

External Factors

Lack of Teaching Resources

During interviews, teachers described the challenges they faced in integrating intercultural awareness into lessons. T2 highlighted the limited availability of teaching materials on Indonesian cultural diversity in English learning, stating, “The main challenge is the lack of teaching materials that specifically discuss Indonesian cultures in

the context of English language learning.” This reflects the need for more localized, culturally rich resources.

T1 and T3 echoed this difficulty, noting that they often relied on folklore or self-made materials, which lacked the depth needed to represent Indonesia’s diverse cultures. This limited students’ exposure to multiple cultural perspectives and hindered the development of intercultural communication skills.

Classroom observations confirmed these issues. In T2’s lesson on cultural weddings, only a video and general prompts were used, while T1’s group activities relied on improvised resources, sometimes resulting in vague or stereotypical content. The lack of comprehensive materials restricted deeper exploration of intercultural themes.

Student Engagement and Interest

When asked about situations where they faced difficulties promoting intercultural awareness, teachers shared several challenges. T2 noted that some students were uninterested in learning about cultures from distant regions, saying they felt such topics were irrelevant. T3 added that students often felt awkward discussing other cultures due to fear of being wrong or lacking information. These responses show that low relevance and fear of mistakes hinder student engagement with intercultural content.

These issues suggest that teachers need strategies to make intercultural topics more relatable and to create a supportive environment where students feel comfortable discussing cultural differences. Connecting lessons to students’ daily experiences and building a nonjudgmental atmosphere may improve participation.

Classroom observations supported these findings. Despite teachers’ efforts to introduce cultural discussions, student engagement was often minimal. In lessons led by T1 and T2, some students responded briefly or seemed disengaged, especially when topics involved unfamiliar traditions. This reinforces the need for culturally responsive strategies and scaffolded activities to help students build confidence and interest in intercultural learning.

Stereotypes and Misunderstandings

When discussing challenges in integrating intercultural awareness, T4 identified student stereotypes as a major obstacle. T4 explained, “Students often have certain stereotypes about cultures from other regions, and that makes it difficult for them to understand with open minded.” This suggests that preconceived notions about other cultures can limit students’ openness and hinder meaningful intercultural learning.

Classroom observations supported this. In T4's class, some students showed discomfort or bias when discussing unfamiliar cultural norms, occasionally misinterpreting or judging cultural practices. These reactions indicated that stereotypes were influencing their engagement. The findings highlight the need for strategies that address stereotypes and promote respectful, open exploration of cultural diversity.

Curriculum Limitations

During the interview, T2 explained that although he felt confident teaching intercultural awareness, he struggled with limited resources, stating, "I am quite confident, but sometimes I feel like I don't have enough resources to enrich my teaching materials." This shows that teachers' confidence is often not supported by adequate materials or teaching aids.

This issue was intensified by the rigid national curriculum, which focuses on standardized content and exams, leaving little space for culturally rich or creative lessons. As a result, intercultural elements are often minimized in speaking instruction.

Classroom observations reflected this constraint. Teachers tried to integrate intercultural topics into textbook-based lessons or short speaking activities, but time and curriculum demand restricted deeper exploration. Although activities like T4's role-plays and T3's folktale retellings were culturally meaningful, they remained limited by curriculum structure.

Table 3 shows the themes and codes of the possible solutions that were found during the study.

Table 3. Themes and Codes: Potential Solutions related to Promoting Intercultural Awareness

No	Themes	Codes
1	Developing Interactive Materials and Resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Used digital media like podcasts, vlogs, and videos. - Suggested adding interviews and tech-based resources.
2	Collaborative Projects and Peer Interaction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Used role-play, group projects, and short films. - Proposed adding regional collaboration.
3	School and Curriculum Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Suggested more flexible curricula and access to teaching materials. - Recommended national curriculum integration of intercultural awareness.

4	Practical Learning Opportunities	- Proposed workshops, guest speakers, and class discussions.
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Potential solutions that teachers aspire to implement in overcoming the challenges in promoting intercultural awareness.

Developing Interactive Materials and Resources

During the interviews, teachers described improvements they hoped to see in teaching intercultural awareness. T2 emphasized using more interactive media such as videos and interviews with people from different regions to increase student interest and provide direct exposure to cultural diversity. T4 shared similar views, suggesting videos, interactive stories, role-plays, and real-life scenarios to help students explore different perspectives.

These responses show that both teachers recognized the value of multimedia tools in making intercultural learning more engaging and meaningful. T1 also recommended digital platforms like vlogs and podcasts to attract students' interest in other cultures.

Overall, teachers believed that modern, interactive media could enhance student engagement and deepen intercultural understanding. However, observations showed that such strategies were not widely implemented; for example, T4 still relied on printed texts rather than digital storytelling. This suggests that limited resources, training, or time may be preventing teachers from fully applying these ideas in practice.

Collaborative Projects and Peer Interaction

In the interviews, teachers shared several potential solutions for addressing challenges in promoting intercultural awareness. T1 suggested creative projects such as short films and podcasts on local culture, believing these would engage students and make cultural topics more relatable. T2 proposed collaborative projects connecting students from different regions to encourage cultural exchange and learning from peers' experiences. Both teachers emphasized interactive, student-centered activities as effective ways to build intercultural understanding.

However, classroom observations showed that these ideas have not yet been fully implemented. T1 used storytelling activities, but individually rather than through multimedia projects, while T2 conducted general group discussions without regional collaboration. No activities involving podcasts, short films, or inter-regional partnerships were observed, indicating that these approaches remain goals for future practice.

School and Curriculum Support

When discussing the support needed to integrate intercultural awareness more effectively, both T1 and T4 emphasized the importance of institutional and curriculum support. T1 highlighted the need to include intercultural awareness in the national curriculum to ensure systematic and sustainable implementation. T4 focused on classroom-level strategies, proposing project-based activities such as interviewing people from different regions and requesting more engaging materials like videos or interactive stories.

Their responses show that teachers need both curriculum flexibility and adequate resources to apply student-centered, culturally rich instruction. However, observations revealed that these ideas have not yet been realized in practice. Teachers continued to follow textbook-based lessons with limited intercultural content. For example, T4 briefly mentioned a traditional event but did not extend it into interviews or presentations. This indicates a gap between teachers' aspirations and the constraints of the existing curriculum.

Practical Learning Opportunities

During the interviews, teachers identified several forms of support that could help integrate intercultural awareness more effectively. T4 suggested inviting guest speakers through workshops or seminars featuring individuals from different regions, emphasizing the value of real-life cultural exposure. T3 recommended incorporating open discussions to encourage students to actively share their cultural perspectives and engage in meaningful dialogue.

However, observations showed that these ideas had not yet been implemented in practice. Teachers occasionally asked students to share brief experiences, but there were no formal open discussions or guest speaker sessions. T3's class involved basic Q&A activities without deeper intercultural exchange, and T4's seminar idea remained unexecuted. This indicates that while teachers value experiential and interactive approaches, practical or institutional constraints hinder their application.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study primarily highlight that the implementation of intercultural awareness in speaking instruction is strongly influenced by systemic and institutional challenges rather than solely by individual teacher limitations. Although teachers demonstrated awareness of the importance of intercultural learning, their efforts were constrained by limited professional preparation, insufficient culturally diverse teaching

resources, rigid curriculum demands, and low student engagement. These findings suggest that the difficulties experienced by teachers are deeply connected to broader structural conditions within the Indonesian education system, where academic achievement and examination targets are often prioritized over intercultural and communicative development.

These findings support Michael Byram's concept of intercultural communicative competence, which emphasizes not only linguistic proficiency but also critical cultural awareness and the ability to mediate between different cultural perspectives. However, this study reveals that such competencies remain insufficiently integrated into teacher preparation programs and classroom practices in the Indonesian context. Similarly, Darla Deardorff argues that intercultural competence develops through continuous reflection and authentic intercultural experiences. The present study extends this perspective by showing that teachers rarely receive institutional opportunities for reflective practice or intercultural professional development, resulting in classroom activities that focus mainly on functional language use and familiar local cultural examples.

The findings further demonstrate that institutional support plays a central role in determining the success of intercultural speaking instruction. Teachers consistently reported limited access to practical training, inadequate monitoring, and a lack of culturally varied instructional materials. These findings are consistent with the work of Avi Handelzalts and Jules Pieters, who emphasize that effective intercultural instruction depends on sufficient teacher preparation and access to appropriate resources. Nevertheless, the current study offers a contextual contribution by illustrating how these challenges are intensified in Indonesian senior high schools, where institutional policies and curriculum structures leave minimal flexibility for intercultural-oriented instruction. This demonstrates that intercultural education in Indonesia is not only a pedagogical issue but also a structural and policy-related concern.

Another important finding concerns student motivation in intercultural learning. While Richard Ryan and Edward Deci emphasize the importance of intrinsic motivation, this study found that student participation increased primarily when teachers used interactive methods such as role-plays, group discussions, and multimedia-based activities. This indicates that student engagement in intercultural speaking activities is strongly shaped by external learning conditions, including access to engaging instructional strategies and technological resources. These findings align with Will Baker's research in Japan and Thailand, which showed that digital platforms and international interaction

opportunities can support intercultural learning. However, the current study contributes new insight by demonstrating that such opportunities remain limited in many Indonesian classrooms due to resource constraints and insufficient teacher training.

Overall, this study contributes to the existing literature by emphasizing that challenges in promoting intercultural awareness in speaking instruction should be understood as systemic and institutional issues rather than merely individual teacher weaknesses. Unlike studies conducted in resource-rich educational settings, this research highlights how Indonesian teachers require structured institutional support, curriculum reform, continuous professional development, and access to culturally diverse teaching materials to effectively integrate intercultural awareness into speaking education. Therefore, the novelty of this study lies in its contextualized explanation of how structural educational conditions shape teachers' experiences in implementing intercultural awareness within Indonesian senior high schools.

CONCLUSION

This study has shown that English teachers face both internal and external challenges when promoting intercultural awareness in speaking instruction. The findings revealed that many teachers lacked confidence in discussing cultural diversity because they had limited intercultural knowledge and insufficient professional training. Several participants explained during the interviews that they rarely received workshops or guidance specifically related to intercultural teaching practices. Classroom observations also showed that teachers often relied on textbook-based activities and familiar local cultural examples because they lacked access to culturally diverse teaching materials and lesson plans. In addition, teachers reported that rigid curriculum targets and time limitations made it difficult to integrate intercultural discussions into speaking activities.

At the same time, the findings demonstrated teachers' willingness to adopt innovative instructional strategies despite these limitations. For example, classroom observations indicated that students became more active and engaged when teachers used role-plays, group discussions, and multimedia-based activities related to cultural topics. Some teachers also expressed their desire for more practical training, collaborative lesson planning, and institutional support to help them confidently implement intercultural learning in speaking classes. These findings suggest that improving intercultural awareness in Indonesian classrooms requires not only individual teacher initiative but also systemic support through curriculum reform, resource provision, and continuous professional development.

Overall, the study underscores that promoting intercultural awareness is both challenging and essential for meaningful language education. The findings indicate that intercultural competence can be systematically developed as an integral component of English speaking instruction when institutional and pedagogical barriers are addressed through coordinated support from teachers, schools, and policymakers.

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