

Applying Total Physical Response to English Vocabulary Instruction for Lower Primary Learners: Strategies and Reflections

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Abstract: English vocabulary learning at the lower primary level lays the foundation for learners' subsequent language development. However, vocabulary instruction in many primary classrooms still relies heavily on rote memorization and teacher-centered practices, resulting in limited language input and insufficient learner engagement. As a representative method within the Comprehension Approach, Total Physical Response (TPR) emphasizes that comprehension precedes production and promotes language learning through physical movement. This paper explores the application of TPR to English vocabulary instruction for lower primary learners. Drawing on the theoretical foundations of TPR, it discusses instructional strategies from four perspectives: establishing vocabulary–meaning connections, promoting vocabulary comprehension, strengthening vocabulary retention, and facilitating vocabulary transfer. It also reflects on the appropriate use and limitations of TPR in classroom practice. The study suggests that TPR effectively enhances vocabulary learning by connecting language, movement, and meaning, while increasing learners' engagement and reducing language anxiety. Nevertheless, TPR should be applied flexibly according to learners' developmental characteristics, instructional objectives, and vocabulary types, and should be integrated with other teaching approaches to maximize its instructional effectiveness.

Keywords: Total Physical Response (TPR); Lower Primary Learners; English Vocabulary Instruction; Instructional Strategies.

1. Introduction

Vocabulary forms the foundation of language learning and serves as an essential basis for developing learners' listening, speaking, reading, and writing abilities. For lower primary learners, who are at the initial stage of English learning, vocabulary acquisition not only influences their comprehension of classroom language but also lays the foundation for subsequent language development and communicative competence. Therefore, improving the effectiveness of vocabulary instruction has long been a central concern in primary English education.

With the continuous development of second language acquisition theories and language teaching methodologies, language instruction has gradually shifted from traditional teacher-centered approaches characterized by grammar translation and mechanical drills to learner-centered approaches that emphasize language acquisition processes, learning experiences, and communicative competence. Among these approaches, Total Physical Response (TPR), proposed by the American psychologist James J. Asher in the 1960s, is one of the representative methods within the Comprehension Approach. TPR is built upon the principle that comprehension precedes production, arguing that second language acquisition should follow the natural process of first language acquisition. Learners are expected to develop language comprehension through abundant comprehensible language input before gradually producing language themselves. Compared with traditional teaching methods, TPR places greater emphasis on the role of physical movement in language learning. Teachers organize classroom activities through commands, encouraging learners to listen, respond physically, and experience language, thereby establishing meaningful connections between linguistic forms and their meanings.

The English Curriculum Standards for Compulsory Education (2022 Edition) advocate learner-centered language education by encouraging students to set appropriate learning goals, actively participate in diverse language activities, listen attentively, communicate confidently, and overcome anxiety when using English[1]. Nevertheless, vocabulary instruction in lower primary English classrooms still faces several challenges. In many classrooms, vocabulary teaching remains dominated by repetitive practices such as teacher modeling, choral repetition, and rote memorization. Learners often depend heavily on Chinese translations rather than meaningful language experiences, resulting in rapid forgetting and limited ability to transfer vocabulary knowledge to new contexts. Moreover, lower primary learners are characterized by concrete thinking, relatively short attention spans, strong needs for physical activity, and a preference for imitation and game-based learning. If vocabulary instruction ignores these developmental characteristics, emphasizes language production prematurely, or relies excessively on abstract explanations, it may reduce learners' motivation and increase language anxiety, ultimately limiting the effectiveness of English learning at the beginning stage.

TPR advocates promoting language comprehension through physical movement, allowing learners to produce language only after sufficient comprehension has been established. Its game-like and experiential learning activities also help reduce learning anxiety. These principles closely correspond to the cognitive, emotional, and developmental characteristics of lower primary learners. From the perspective of vocabulary instruction, physical movement not only facilitates learners' understanding of word meanings but also helps establish meaningful connections among language, movement, and meaning, thereby promoting vocabulary comprehension, retention, and use. Consequently, exploring

the application of TPR in lower primary English vocabulary instruction can enrich instructional strategies while providing theoretical and practical implications for improving classroom effectiveness.

Against this background, this paper investigates the application of TPR in English vocabulary instruction for lower primary learners. After examining the theoretical foundations of TPR, it analyzes why the approach is particularly suitable for vocabulary instruction at the lower primary level. It then proposes practical instructional strategies focusing on establishing vocabulary–meaning connections, promoting language comprehension, strengthening vocabulary retention, and facilitating vocabulary transfer, followed by reflections on the effective implementation of TPR in classroom teaching.

2. Theoretical Foundations for Applying TPR to English Vocabulary Instruction for Lower Primary Learners

Total Physical Response (TPR) is a language teaching method that promotes language acquisition through learners' physical responses to teachers' verbal commands. In a typical TPR classroom, learners first receive language input in the form of commands, demonstrate their understanding through physical movements, and gradually progress to using the target language independently. This process reflects an immersive approach to language learning[2]. The theoretical foundations of TPR mainly include the Bio-program, Brain Lateralization, Trace Theory, and the Reduction of Stress theory. Together, these theories explain why TPR advocates the principle that comprehension precedes production and provide strong theoretical support for its application to English vocabulary instruction in lower primary schools. Since lower primary learners are at the beginning stage of language learning and exhibit developmental characteristics that closely align with the principles of TPR, the approach possesses both sound theoretical foundations and considerable pedagogical value for vocabulary instruction.

2.1. Following Children' Natural Language Acquisition Process: The Bio-program

According to Asher's Bio-program, human beings are biologically equipped with an innate capacity for language acquisition, and second language learning should follow the natural developmental sequence of first language acquisition as closely as possible. During first language acquisition, children do not begin by speaking. Instead, they experience a gradual process of listening, comprehending, and then producing language. They repeatedly listen to the commands issued by parents or caregivers and respond with appropriate physical actions, gradually developing an understanding of linguistic meaning. Only after sufficient comprehension has been established does spontaneous language production emerge. Consequently, TPR maintains that learners should not be required to speak immediately but should first develop language competence through abundant comprehensible language input.

This principle closely corresponds to the characteristics of English learning among lower primary learners. At this stage, learners possess limited vocabulary and have not yet developed adequate productive language abilities. Requiring immediate oral production may increase cognitive burden and

reduce learners' motivation. Instead, teachers can facilitate vocabulary learning by giving simple and comprehensible commands and encouraging learners to demonstrate their understanding through physical responses. For example, when teaching expressions such as stand up, sit down, and open your book, learners are not expected to repeat or translate the expressions immediately. Rather, they respond physically to the teacher's instructions, gradually establishing direct associations between English vocabulary and its intended meaning. Through continuous exposure to meaningful language input, learners gradually develop a cognitive map of English vocabulary that serves as a foundation for subsequent language production. Therefore, vocabulary instruction at the lower primary level should prioritize comprehension while allowing language production to develop progressively.

2.2. Aligning with Children's Cognitive Characteristics: Brain Lateralization

Another important theoretical foundation of TPR is the theory of Brain Lateralization. Asher proposed that the two hemispheres of the brain perform different functions. The right hemisphere is primarily responsible for motor activity, spatial awareness, holistic processing, and intuitive thinking, whereas the left hemisphere mainly supports linguistic analysis, logical reasoning, and language production. During the early stages of language learning, children tend to rely more heavily on right-brain processing, constructing language meaning through physical movement and contextualized experiences before gradually engaging the analytical functions of the left hemisphere.

This theory is particularly relevant to lower primary learners, whose thinking remains largely concrete rather than abstract. Young learners generally respond more positively to physical movement, visual stimuli, and game-based activities than to abstract linguistic explanations. TPR capitalizes on these developmental characteristics by using physical movement as a medium for vocabulary learning. For example, when teaching action verbs such as jump, run, and turn around, teachers demonstrate the target actions, while learners observe, imitate, and perform them to construct word meaning without relying on translation. Likewise, prepositions indicating spatial relationships and vocabulary related to body parts can be effectively taught through movement and physical interaction. It should be emphasized that physical movement is not an instructional goal in itself; rather, it functions as a meaningful pedagogical tool for constructing vocabulary knowledge. Through embodied learning experiences, learners establish direct connections between linguistic forms and authentic contexts, thereby improving vocabulary comprehension.

2.3. Strengthening Vocabulary Retention: Trace Theory

Trace Theory proposes that the richer and stronger the memory traces formed during learning, the more effectively knowledge can be retained and retrieved. TPR reinforces memory by synchronizing verbal input with physical movement, thereby strengthening the associations between linguistic information and motor experiences. Compared with learning based solely on auditory or visual input, multisensory engagement contributes more effectively to the formation of long-term memory.

This theory offers important implications for vocabulary

instruction in lower primary classrooms. Since young learners generally have relatively short attention spans, repetitive memorization alone often fails to sustain learning motivation. By integrating visual, auditory, and kinesthetic modalities, TPR provides a more engaging and developmentally appropriate learning experience. For instance, when teaching vocabulary related to fruits, animals, or body parts, teachers may combine pictures, real objects, physical demonstrations, and verbal commands to encourage learners to see, hear, and act simultaneously. Such multisensory experiences not only facilitate learners' understanding of word meanings but also promote stronger lexical representations, thereby improving successful recall. Therefore, vocabulary instruction for lower primary learners should make full use of multimodal resources instead of relying exclusively on explanation and repetition.

2.4. Lowering the Affective Filter: Reduction of Stress

TPR also emphasizes the crucial role of affective factors in language learning. Asher argued that a relaxed and enjoyable learning environment facilitates language acquisition, whereas anxiety and excessive pressure may impede learning. Consequently, TPR does not require learners to produce language immediately during the initial stages of instruction. Instead, teachers are encouraged to tolerate learners' errors and create enjoyable learning experiences through game-like and experiential activities, allowing language acquisition to occur naturally.

This principle is particularly valuable for lower primary learners. As children's self-awareness gradually develops, many become reluctant to participate in English activities because they fear making mistakes. Excessive emphasis on linguistic accuracy and frequent error correction may discourage classroom participation and increase language anxiety. By allowing learners to respond physically before speaking, TPR enables them to participate successfully without experiencing excessive communicative pressure. Meanwhile, game-based activities satisfy children's natural preference for movement and play, creating a positive emotional climate that enhances learning motivation and confidence. Therefore, teachers should establish supportive and low-anxiety classroom environments in which learners are encouraged to participate actively and acquire vocabulary through positive learning experiences.

In summary, TPR is particularly suitable for English vocabulary instruction at the lower primary level not only because it aligns with children's natural language acquisition process, cognitive development, and affective needs, but also because it facilitates the construction of meaningful connections among language, movement, and meaning. By enabling learners to comprehend language through physical experience, TPR supports vocabulary acquisition in a meaningful and developmentally appropriate manner. These theoretical foundations provide important guidance for instructional design and suggest that vocabulary activities should be organized around meaningful physical engagement so that learners can internalize and subsequently transfer newly acquired vocabulary through understanding rather than rote memorization.

3. Instructional Strategies for Applying TPR to English Vocabulary Instruction for Lower Primary Learners

Based on the TPR principle that comprehension precedes production, teachers should fully exploit the mediating role of physical movement in language learning. By engaging learners in meaningful physical activities, teachers can help them comprehend the meanings of target vocabulary before gradually internalizing and transferring newly acquired lexical knowledge. Considering the developmental characteristics of lower primary learners and the process of vocabulary acquisition, the implementation of TPR can follow a progressive sequence of meaning construction, comprehension enhancement, vocabulary retention, and contextualized transfer. Throughout this process, meaningful connections among language, movement, and meaning are established, thereby improving the effectiveness of vocabulary instruction.

3.1. Designing Physical Movements According to Vocabulary Types: Establishing Connections Between Vocabulary and Meaning

TPR emphasizes the synchronization of language input and physical movement. However, physical movements should not be selected arbitrarily. Instead, they should be designed according to the semantic characteristics of different types of vocabulary so that movement serves as an effective medium for meaning construction. Therefore, teachers should employ representative and easily interpretable movements to help learners establish direct associations between English words and their meanings rather than relying on translation into the first language.

For concrete nouns, teachers may adopt a combination of pointing and touching activities supported by realia or authentic classroom objects. For example, when teaching classroom vocabulary such as door, window, and desk, teachers can give commands such as "Point to the door." or "Touch your desk." Learners respond by locating and touching the corresponding objects, thereby directly associating the target words with real-world referents. Similarly, when introducing vocabulary related to body parts, such as nose, eyes, and ears, learners can touch the corresponding body parts while listening to the teacher's commands, making vocabulary learning more concrete and meaningful.

For action verbs, a demonstration-imitation approach can be adopted. Teachers first demonstrate target actions in an exaggerated and expressive manner to illustrate verbs such as jump, run, smile, and wash. Learners then observe and imitate these movements, gradually constructing the meanings of the target words through physical experience. Compared with direct verbal explanation, this approach is more consistent with young learners' developmental characteristics, as they naturally enjoy imitation and physical activity. Moreover, embodied experiences contribute to stronger lexical representations and facilitate vocabulary learning.

For adjectives and prepositions, teachers may make use of facial expressions, body movements, and spatial demonstrations to illustrate meaning. For instance, the adjectives happy and sad can be represented through smiling,

laughing, frowning, or lowering one's head. Likewise, spatial prepositions such as under, behind, and in can be taught by asking learners to manipulate classroom objects. Learners may follow commands such as "Put the pencil under the book." and physically perform the action, enabling them to understand spatial relationships through authentic experience rather than abstract explanation.

In summary, the design of physical movements should always serve the construction of lexical meaning. Only when learners can directly associate English vocabulary with meaningful physical experiences can they gradually reduce their reliance on first-language translation and develop a more direct understanding of word meanings. This process lays the foundation for meaningful vocabulary acquisition and subsequent language development.

3.2. Creating Command-Based Contexts to Promote Vocabulary Comprehension: Providing Effective Language Input

In TPR instruction, commands serve not only as a means of organizing classroom activities but also as an important source of language input. Teachers should design instructional contexts according to learners' language proficiency and provide commands of increasing complexity, enabling learners to gradually construct word meanings through physical responses[3].

At the initial stage of instruction, simple commands can be used to establish basic associations between vocabulary and physical movement. Commands such as "Touch your book.", "Open the window.", and "Stand up." are linguistically simple and semantically transparent, allowing learners to comprehend the target vocabulary quickly through physical responses. Such activities lay a solid foundation for subsequent vocabulary learning.

As learners' vocabulary knowledge expands, teachers can gradually introduce chain commands, such as "Pick up your pencil. Put it on the desk." or "Open your book and point to the picture." Compared with single commands, chain commands provide richer language input and require learners to comprehend multiple lexical items before carrying out a sequence of actions. In this way, learners' listening comprehension and vocabulary knowledge develop simultaneously.

Once learners have acquired a certain level of comprehension, teachers may further deepen vocabulary learning by using novel combinations. For example, after learners have mastered words such as apple, head, and put, teachers can issue commands such as "Put the apple on your head." or "Put your book under the chair." Although these commands may appear unusual or humorous, learners can respond correctly only if they understand both the meanings of the individual words and the relationships among them, rather than relying on rote memorization. Consequently, novel combinations provide an effective way to assess learners' vocabulary comprehension while promoting flexible vocabulary use across different contexts.

Therefore, the design of classroom commands should follow a progressive sequence, moving from simple to more complex forms. More importantly, teachers should ensure that language input remains meaningful and contextually appropriate so that learners consistently construct vocabulary knowledge through comprehension rather than mechanical repetition.

3.3. Reinforcing Vocabulary Retention Through Game-Based Activities: Strengthening the Connection Among Language, Movement, and Meaning.

Vocabulary acquisition requires repeated exposure and continuous reinforcement. However, for lower primary learners, repetitive drills alone often reduce learning motivation and classroom engagement. TPR integrates repetition into enjoyable classroom activities, enabling learners to strengthen the connections among language, movement, and meaning while developing more durable memory traces.

Teachers may design a variety of game-based activities according to instructional objectives. For example, in the classic Simon Says game, learners must carefully distinguish whether the teacher begins a command with "Simon says." Only when the complete command is given should they perform the corresponding action. This activity effectively develops learners' listening attention, response speed, and vocabulary recognition while providing repeated exposure to target vocabulary.

Other activities, such as Guessing Game and TPR Relay Race, can also effectively reinforce vocabulary learning. In a Guessing Game, one learner performs the target vocabulary through physical movement while classmates identify the corresponding word. During a TPR Relay Race, learners perform and pass on a sequence of actions, with the final learner identifying the target vocabulary. Through observing, imitating, expressing, and cooperating with peers, learners repeatedly encounter and practice the target vocabulary, thereby consolidating lexical meaning in an engaging learning environment.

It should be emphasized, however, that games are instructional means rather than instructional goals. Teachers should design activities around specific vocabulary learning objectives, carefully manage classroom pacing, and ensure that learners strengthen language comprehension through purposeful participation rather than treating classroom activities merely as entertainment.

3.4. Creating Authentic Contexts to Facilitate Vocabulary Transfer: From Comprehension to Language Use

The ultimate goal of vocabulary instruction is not merely to promote vocabulary comprehension or memorization but to enable learners to use newly acquired words appropriately in authentic communicative contexts. After learners have developed a basic understanding of target vocabulary, teachers should provide rich and meaningful learning contexts that encourage the transfer and application of vocabulary knowledge.

Picture books, storytelling, and role-play are particularly effective contexts for implementing TPR at this stage. For example, when teaching with the well-known picture book *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*, teachers may assign specific physical movements to key vocabulary items before reading the story. Learners may imitate the crawling movement of a caterpillar, pretend to eat when hearing the verb eat, and mime sleeping when the word sleep appears. By responding physically as the story unfolds, learners actively participate in the narrative while repeatedly reinforcing their understanding of target vocabulary within a meaningful context.

Building upon story comprehension, teachers may further

organize role-play activities, assigning learners different roles such as the caterpillar, various fruits, or the butterfly. Through physical movement, facial expressions, and simple verbal interactions, learners recreate the storyline and experience the vocabulary in authentic communicative situations. Such activities not only deepen learners' understanding of lexical meaning but also encourage them to use newly acquired vocabulary for meaningful communication, thereby promoting the transition from vocabulary comprehension to language use.

Therefore, the application of TPR should not remain at the level of merely responding to teachers' commands through physical movements. Instead, teachers should gradually create more authentic and diverse learning contexts in which learners continuously construct meaning, transfer vocabulary knowledge, and develop their communicative competence. In this way, the pedagogical value of TPR in English vocabulary instruction for lower primary learners can be fully realized.

4. Reflections on the Application of TPR to English Vocabulary Instruction for Lower Primary Learners

As a representative method within the Comprehension Approach, Total Physical Response (TPR) offers distinct advantages for English vocabulary instruction in the lower primary grades. Nevertheless, like any instructional approach, TPR has its own scope of applicability and inherent limitations. Teachers should adopt a balanced perspective on both the strengths and constraints of TPR, taking learners' developmental characteristics and instructional objectives into consideration. Rather than simply equating TPR with "learning English through physical movements," teachers should capitalize on its strengths in promoting language comprehension and meaning construction while integrating it with other instructional approaches when appropriate.

4.1. Recognizing the Developmental Suitability of TPR

TPR is particularly appropriate for learners at the beginning stage of English learning, especially those in the lower primary grades. Young learners rely primarily on concrete and intuitive thinking and respond positively to physical movement, visual support, and game-based activities. By linking physical actions with language input, TPR helps learners construct word meanings more directly, reduces the difficulty of language learning, and increases classroom engagement. Consequently, TPR is especially effective for teaching action verbs, body parts, classroom objects, animals, colors, and spatial prepositions, enabling learners to establish direct associations between vocabulary items and their real-world referents.

However, as learners mature and their language proficiency develops, English learning gradually shifts from concrete to more abstract concepts. Physical movement alone is no longer sufficient to support all aspects of language learning. For example, abstract vocabulary related to emotions, values, and opinions cannot always be accurately represented through actions, while complex sentence structures and higher-level language skills require contextual analysis, meaningful communication, and cognitive engagement. Therefore, teachers should select instructional methods according to learners' developmental stages and instructional objectives.

While TPR can play a dominant role during the initial stages of language learning, it should gradually be complemented by other teaching approaches as learners' language abilities continue to develop.

4.2. Facilitating a Natural Transition from Comprehension to Language Production

Although TPR advocates the principle that comprehension precedes production, this does not imply that language learning should remain at the stage of listening to commands and performing physical actions. Asher proposed that language development follows a natural sequence from listening to speaking, and subsequently to reading and writing. Accordingly, physical movement should be regarded as a starting point for language comprehension rather than the ultimate goal of language learning.

In lower primary English vocabulary instruction, teachers should carefully balance language comprehension and language production. At the initial stage, learners should receive abundant comprehensible input through command-based activities that reduce the pressure of immediate verbal production. As learners gradually develop a sufficient vocabulary foundation, teachers should introduce opportunities for meaningful language output. For example, after learners can accurately respond to commands such as "Touch your nose." and "Open the window.", they may be encouraged to give commands independently, describe actions, or participate in simple dialogues. As instruction progresses, vocabulary learning can be further extended through picture-book reading, guided writing activities, and other literacy tasks, enabling learners to progress naturally from listening and speaking to reading and writing while fostering comprehensive language development.

4.3. Strengthening Teachers' Instructional Competence to Ensure Effective TPR Implementation

TPR classrooms are characterized by rich physical interaction and dynamic classroom activities, placing considerable demands on teachers' professional competence and classroom management skills. Teachers function not only as organizers of classroom activities but also as designers and facilitators of language learning. Every instructional activity and physical movement should therefore be purposefully designed to support vocabulary learning [4].

First, teachers should develop the ability to design appropriate physical movements that accurately represent the meanings of target vocabulary. Movements should be simple, meaningful, and closely related to the lexical items being taught to avoid misunderstanding or unnecessary cognitive burden. Second, teachers should strengthen their classroom management skills by carefully controlling instructional pacing and allocating sufficient time for meaningful participation without allowing classroom activities to become the primary focus of instruction. In addition, teachers should diversify classroom organization by incorporating cooperative learning, competitive games, role-play, and other interactive activities that encourage active participation while addressing individual differences among learners and providing opportunities for all students to experience success[5][6].

Therefore, the effectiveness of TPR depends not only on the instructional approach itself but also on teachers' ability to design meaningful learning experiences that enable learners

to understand and use language through physical interaction rather than merely imitate isolated actions.

4.4. Integrating TPR with Other Language Teaching Approaches

Asher emphasized that TPR should be regarded as “a useful set of techniques” rather than a comprehensive teaching method applicable to all instructional contexts. Consequently, TPR should be integrated with other language teaching approaches to better support learners' overall language development.

In lower primary English vocabulary instruction, TPR can be combined with Phonics to strengthen connections among pronunciation, spelling, and meaning after learners have established basic lexical understanding. It can also be integrated with Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) by creating authentic communicative situations following physical activities, thereby encouraging learners to use newly acquired vocabulary in meaningful interaction. Furthermore, TPR may be incorporated into picture-book instruction and Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT), where storytelling, role-play, and task completion provide meaningful contexts for vocabulary transfer and language use.

Accordingly, teachers should adopt an open and flexible instructional perspective, selecting and integrating teaching approaches according to instructional objectives and learners' needs. While fully utilizing the strengths of TPR in promoting language comprehension, classroom engagement, and affective support, teachers should also draw upon the advantages of other instructional approaches to compensate for TPR's limitations in teaching abstract language and developing higher-order language abilities. Such integration can contribute to more effective and balanced English vocabulary instruction in the lower primary classroom.

5. Conclusion

Total Physical Response (TPR) is well aligned with the language acquisition process and developmental characteristics of lower primary learners. By establishing meaningful connections among language, movement, and meaning, it enables learners to construct vocabulary knowledge through comprehension and embodied experience.

Consequently, TPR contributes to increased learning motivation, reduced language anxiety, enhanced classroom participation, and more effective vocabulary learning.

However, TPR should not be regarded as a universal solution applicable to every instructional context. Its pedagogical value lies not in physical movement itself but in the meaningful construction of language through movement. As learners' language proficiency develops, teachers should gradually guide them from listening and responding toward listening, speaking, reading, and writing, while integrating TPR with other language teaching approaches according to instructional objectives and learners' developmental needs.

More importantly, the study of TPR highlights a broader implication for language teaching: no single teaching method is universally effective. Rather than adhering rigidly to one instructional approach, teachers should critically evaluate the strengths and limitations of different methodologies and make pedagogically informed decisions based on learners' characteristics and instructional contexts. In doing so, teaching methods can genuinely serve learners' language development instead of becoming ends in themselves.

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