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A Study of Home Emergent Literacy Experiences of Young Latino English Learners

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Abstract

This empirical study explored the home environment literacy practices of young Latino English learners and their families. The participants were 217 incoming Kindergarten Latino EL students and parents. The data collection included a completed HLEQ by the parents. In addition, children were administered the PPVT, the pre-LAS, the PALS-K screening, the Woodcock Reading Mastery assessment, and the Wide Range Achievement test. All of the literacy assessments given to the children provided the researchers with comprehensive look at their literacy knowledge base. The results of this study indicate that there were two significant paths for students' achievement: availability of books and child initiated literacy factors that were directly related to the phonological processing efforts of students.

Keywords: Latino, English learners, kindergarten, home literacy

Introduction

Emergent literacy experiences before the formal start of schooling have a profound impact on student literacy-learning trajectories. Researchers have repeatedly found that oral language and literacy practices (parent–child reading and writing, alphabetic knowledge) that match with school expectations (such as alphabetic code and

print knowledge) lead to better school outcomes (Pianta et al. 2002). However, school readiness assessments often fail to capture the richness of literacy experiences of culturally and linguistically students (Souto-Manning 2013). The disparity between teachers' expectations and Latino ELs is often interpreted through the lens of a deficiency and remediation, failing to realize the diversity of experiences and capitalize on inherent strengths (e.g. Compton-Lilly et al. 2012). This empirical study explores the diversity of home literacy experiences of young Latino EL children entering kindergarten and the relationship between those early experiences and subsequent school achievement.

Family Influences on Literacy

Sonnenschein et al. (1996) argued that when focusing on family influence on children's literacies, teachers and researchers must “consider the child as a member of a family system operating with the constraints of various societal rules and mores” (p. 4). Families play a key role in fostering early learning opportunities that directly impact their children's emergent literacy prior to school entry (Ehri and Roberts 2006).

In a recent meta-analytic study Compton-Lilly et al. (2012) reviewed 213 substantive studies on family literacy practices. They found that much of the family literacy

scholarship was framed in terms of strengths and deficits of families. This is especially true when dealing with culturally and linguistically diverse families.

Family literacy research is constantly negotiating the boundary between formal school expectations and the knowledge that parents and children bring with them into the classroom. Compton-Lilly et al. (2012) concluded that it is crucial for family literacy practitioners, schools, and educators to be aware of the *funds of knowledge* brought into the school by children and families. The researchers argue that it is critical that school and family literacy practitioners build on the rich diverse literacy practices brought into the classroom.

Latino ELs

Latino students are by far the largest population of ELs in United States schools. Seventy-two percent of students who speak a language other than English at home speak Spanish as their native language (August and Shanahan 2006). In the state where this study was conducted, one out of every five kindergartners are of Hispanic origin. In this article, we use the term Latino, which categorizes people who self-identify with a variety of terms such as Hispanic, Latino, Mexican, Puerto Rican, or Cuban.

Theoretical Frame

The theoretical framework for this study is based on the research of home literacy environment and family literacy practices including access to print, linguistic access, and shared literacy experiences among family members (Figure 1: Model of Home Literacy Impacts).

Home Environment

The home environment provides the earliest learning context for developing vocabulary (Hart and Risley 1995) and exposure to concepts of print (Whitehurst and Lonigan 2001). Risley and Hart (2006) found that the quantity of family conversation was directly related to children’s vocabulary growth and oral language ability. Children who experience a rich language environment develop much of

their vocabulary knowledge at home, which in turn stimulates growth in phonological processing (Walley et al. 2003).

Differences in home literacy environment have been linked to differences in early literacy achievement and later school success (Sénéchal and LeFevre 2002). While there are some studies on second language learning in the school setting, there is less research on bilingual children’s home literacy environments and its interaction with reading and language experiences (Hammer and Miccio 2006). In fact, Reardon and Galindo (2006) suggest that different literacy practices among families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds may lead to qualitatively different patterns of language development among young ELs.

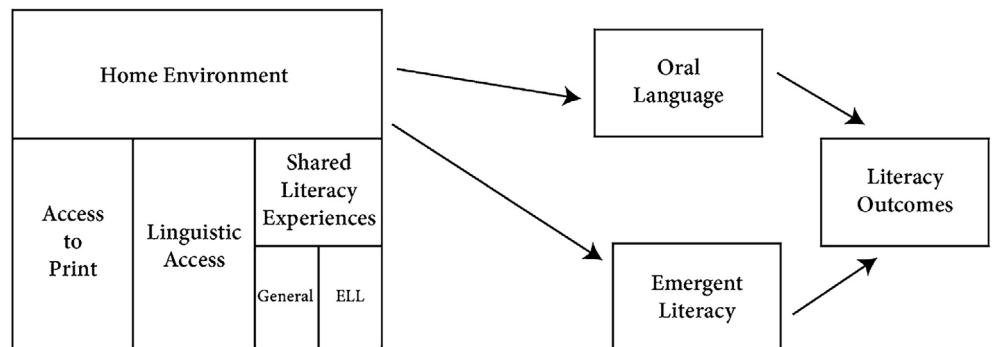
There is ample evidence that linguistically diverse families do provide language opportunities to support their children’s emergent literacy skills, albeit, the specific strategies employed often differ from those observed in mainstream American homes (Delgado-Gaitán 2004). A study conducted by Perry et al. (2008) found that among Latino families of preschool children, parents did engage in home literacy practices but not in the manner in which they are taught in schools.

Shared book reading with children is a typical U.S. middle class literacy practice (Carrington and Luke 2003), however, many cultures value oral storytelling and other forms of literacies more (Heath 1983). As a result, some children are socialized to school literacy models early through pre-school and life experiences and have had multiple opportunities to develop oral language skills that support expected literacy learning (Dyson 2003). Other students have attained knowledge and developed literacy skills that are useful for functioning at home and in their community but they can be a mismatch to the more formal, print-based literacy learning that takes place in the classroom (Dyson 2003).

Linguistic Access: Second Language Acquisition

Transference Theory (García and Jensen 2007), supported by extensive research, indicates that young children transfer skills from their first language (L1) to learning

Figure 1. Model of home literacy impacts



a second language (L2). For young children, L1 has been used since birth to establish meaningful communicative relationships and construct knowledge; thus, it is a strong predictor of overall language development (Burns et al. 1999). Development of L1 in ELs provides a foundational basis for learning to read and contributes to English literacy development (Thomas and Collier 2012).

Research has shown that for ELs, phonological processes in the L1 predict successful literacy acquisition in both languages (Gottardo 2002). Phonological skills—i.e., differentiating and manipulating basic units of sounds in speech—undergird the ability to connect sounds and symbols (Burns et al. 1999). Even more importantly for our work, phonological processing skills developed in one language can transfer to another language, even while those skills are still in the process of being developed (Cisero and Royer 1995). As a result, any investigation of home literacy practices must extend to include both first and second language practices of the parents and children.

Diversity, Poverty, and Access to Print

For many immigrant families, including Latinos, there is an overlap between poverty, immigrant status, and linguistic differences. We recognize that these terms are not synonymous but that there is a substantial overlap that compounds what is often referred to as *at-risk* status. According to Hernandez (2006), Latino EL children from birth to 8 years of age are more likely to live below the official poverty level (26%), compared with children of the same age in the general population (16%). Furthermore, Latino ELs who live in homes in which little or no English is spoken are even more likely to live in poverty. While poverty itself does not directly impact literacy learning it has an indirect impact through family stress, lack of parental supervision (of working parents), and lack of access to literacy and print resources (Foster et al. 2005). Research done by Kreider et al. (2011) found that families who “have been underserved by virtue of their socioeconomic status, race and/or home language tend to be exposed to fewer books at home, a less language rich environment, and less frequent shared book reading experiences” (p. 99). Children who come from families living in poverty are less likely to have emergent literacy experiences that match school expectations (Adams 1990), which explain, in part, poor oral language and emergent literacy performance at school entry.

Shared Reading Practices of ELs

In a meta-analytic review, Bus et al. (1995) found that joint book reading is a critical component in building emergent literacy skills. Several studies (Hood et al. 2008; Sénéchal 2006) have shown that storybook reading at home during the preschool years is related to oral

language development, but some studies have suggested that storybook reading alone is not enough to significantly impact emergent literacy skills (e.g. Bracken and Fischel 2008). Instead, they suggest that when parents involve their children in shared book reading interactions, they will be more likely to draw their children’s attention to the print on the page. Through shared reading, children learn the patterns of written language vocabulary (Sénéchal and LeFevre 2002) and concepts of print.

Latino families have been found to be less likely to read books and share texts with their children than parents from other ethnic groups (Flores et al. 2005). Reese et al. (2000) found that many Latino parents believe that children under age 5 are not yet ready to understand the reading process and therefore do not engage in certain emergent literacy practices that are expected in schools. In our own work, we found that Latino parents were interested in, and capable of reading to their children; however, a variety of circumstances such as time, finances, and transportation limited their chances to do so.

Student Initiated Literacy Behaviors

There is evidence to suggest that Transfer Theory holds true for young children learning to write as well as read (Freeman and Freeman 2006). Young children across different languages and cultures reveal an awareness of the specific writing features of their native languages as well as important aspects of phonological processes, spelling and other aspects of literacy development (Harste et al. 1984). There is considerable evidence to show that young ELs can write in L2 before mastering the language orally (Samway 2006).

When we integrate the literature on home practices and literacy development into a coherent model we hypothesize that Home Literacy Practices impact Emergent Literacy skills (oral language, alphabetic knowledge, Rapid Automatized Naming (RAN), phonological memory) which are all precursors of decoding, fluency and spelling (Figure 1: Model of Home Literacy Impacts). The each component of the Home Literacy Impacts model (Figure 1: Model of Home Literacy Impacts) have been outlined in the literature review and analyzed during data analysis. Further we hypothesize that literacy practices vary greatly between homes of ELs and do not conform to teachers’ stereotypical views of English Learning Latino families.

In this study we seek to examine the Home Literacy Impacts model created based extensive literature which focuses on variability within bilingual Latino families and its relationship to school literacy performance. We are guided by the following three questions:

1. How can we describe the specific family literacy practices of Latino ELs entering elementary schools?

2. How can we describe the specific family literacy practices of Latinos ELs entering elementary schools?
3. What are the relationships between the family experiences and subsequent literacy related skills (oral language, alphabetic knowledge, and phonological processes) for Latino ELs?

We believe that the data examined in this paper can serve as a way to problematize stereotypical view of families of young Latino ELs. The potential diversity and extent of practices can help teachers understand the ELs and their families represent a heterogeneous group and that only an individualized can connect home and school practices.

Methods

Participants

The study included two cohorts of Latino ELs ($n_1 = 117$ and $n_2 = 97$) at entry into kindergarten and their parents. None of the students repeated kindergarten during the study. All recruitment, enrollment, assignment, intervention, and testing procedures were kept identical across cohorts. Children were distributed across 26 classrooms in six rural Midwestern elementary schools. This sample has been reported about in a separate intervention study focused on school literacy outcomes (Nelson et al. 2011). Children were identified as ELs if they performed at the Limited English speaker or lower (score of 1–3) on the Oral Language portion of the Pre-Literacy Language Assessment Scales 2000 (pre-LAS200; DeAvila and Duncan 2000). The participants were 52.6% male (cohort 1 = 52.6% and cohort 2 = 52.7%). Student ages at kindergarten entry ranged from 4 years and 11 months to 6 years and 4 months ($M = 5$ years and 6 months, $SD = 4$ months). Sixty-six percent of families reported receiving free/reduced lunch assistance. Ninety-four percent of participants reported speaking Spanish only at home. The study followed all IRB requirements for ethical practices approved by the University of Nebraska–Lincoln and local school districts. Parents who chose to participate in the study gave consent in their preferred language (Spanish in most cases).

Measures

Home Literacy Practices

Home literacy environment was measured using the Home Literacy Environment Questionnaire (HLEQ; Griffin and Morrison 1997) is available in both English and Spanish. The questionnaire asked parents to rate the literacy

behaviors in the home using categorical and rating scale responses. Items include availability of literacy resources at home, parent literacy practices and joint activities with children. In their study, Griffin and Morrison (1997) found that such practices measured by the questionnaire predicted about 10% of the variance in vocabulary knowledge. For the current sample, the internal consistency coefficient was .77.

Oral Language

Receptive vocabulary (English) was measured using the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test-III (PPVT-III; Dunn and Dunn 2006). In this test students are asked to select the picture that is the closest in meaning of an orally presented English word. The PPVT manual reports an internal consistency coefficient (Cronbach alpha) of .94 for this age group. For the current sample, internal consistency was .96.

English Language Proficiency was measured using the preLAS. The preLAS (DeAvila & Duncan & 2000) measures oral language and emergent literacy skills of ELs ages 3–6. The preLAS uses game formats to assess student knowledge on various skills including naming colors, listening comprehension, naming shapes and spatial relationships. The measure has a reported internal consistency of .95 (Vogel et al. 2008).

Vocabulary was a curriculum-based measure developed by the researchers. The test included 50 multiple-choice items. The words were randomly sampled from the kindergarten curriculum. With each item students had to match a meaning to an orally presented word choosing one of three options. This test complements the PPVT by being more sensitive to individual differences within this narrow age band. Internal consistency was .93.

Emergent Literacy

Letter knowledge was measured using the Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening (PALS-K; Invernizzi et al. 2009) designed specifically for students in Kindergarten. We chose the upper case and lower case Alphabet recognition tasks. These tasks were reported reliability of .92 for both tasks. We used these two subtests because they best represent basic literacy expectations for incoming kindergartners.

Phonological awareness was also measured using the PALS-K (Invernizzi et al. 2009). For this task we used the letter sound subtest. Internal consistency was .88 for this study.

Spelling was assessed using the Wide Range Achievement Test- Revised (Jastak and Wilkinson 1984). In this subtest children are asked to copy symbols, write their name and write dictated words. Internal consistency reliability was .96 in this study.

Word identification this subtest, from the Woodcock Reading Mastery Test Revised (Woodcock 1987, 1998), assesses children's ability to read 106 increasingly complex words. The reported split half reliability is .98. Internal consistency in this study was .94.

Decoding the Word Attack subtest, from the Woodcock Reading Mastery Test Revised Normative Update (Woodcock 1987, 1998), assesses children's abilities to decode 50 increasingly complex non-words. The reported split half reliability is .94. Internal consistency in this study was .90.

Results

The data collected in this study is correlational as is often the case in studies of home literacy. As a result we chose to analyze the data in three steps corresponding to our research questions. The first was examining the main findings about home literacy environment (Figure 1: Model of Home Literacy Impacts).

We followed up with a factor analysis of the items to examine the validity of the measure with this specific population. Finally, we created a latent variable model that can highlight the significant relationships between early literacy practices and subsequent early literacy performance.

Research Question #1: How can we describe the specific family literacy practices of Latino ELS entering elementary schools?

Descriptive item statistics (Table 1) show that 40.2% of the participating families had a library card and that 16.2% had more than 30 books at home. Despite the low access to books parents reported that 61.6% of fathers and 88.7% of mothers read at least once a week. Most parents (87.2%) reported that their children spent 1–3 h watching TV daily. Although TV watching practices are often associated with lower literacy achievement, in the case of ELS the relationship may be different since TV offers an opportunity to acquire richer oral language in both L1 and L2. At the same time 90% reported providing deliberate literacy instruction (teaching to read, letters or writing) at least once a week with about one family in five (19%) doing so daily. Fully two-thirds of parents indicated that their children regularly (five times a week or more) exhibited emergent writing behaviors.

Research Question #2: How can we describe the specific family literacy practices of Latino ELS entering elementary schools?

We used exploratory factor analysis to validate the instrument to this specific population, taking into account

Table 1. Descriptive statistics

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Range
Oral language			
preLAS	58.70	22.97	0–96
Vocabulary	4.98	6.87	0–25
PPVT*	74.80	16.51	0–84
Alphabetic knowledge			
PALS upper case letter	17.68	9.03	0–26
PALS lower case letter	13.95	11.03	0–26
PALS letter sound	8.31	8.31	0–26
Phonological processing/decoding			
WRAT spelling*	91.12	11.95	0–6
WRMT word ID*	90.38	16.09	0–48
WRMT word attack*	94.81	4.17	0–14

N = 208. All scores reported are raw scores unless otherwise noted.
* Standards scores: *PPVT* = Peabody picture vocabulary Test-III-A; *PALS* = phonological awareness literacy screening; *WRAT* = wide range achievement test–revised spelling subtest; *WRMT* = Woodcock reading mastery test–revised

the possibility that the relationship between items in the survey will be different for this population than for mainstream learners. Following the recommendations Gerbing and Hamilton (1996), we conduct an exploratory factor analysis using a Maximum Likelihood estimation and Varimax rotation. Visual analysis of the scree plot revealed four factors and a fit index $\chi^2(62) = 154.9$ $p < .001$. The first factor—*Periodicals Availability*—includes items about magazine and newspaper reading. The second factor—*Book Availability*—includes items about book availability at home and use of the library. The third factor—*Family Practices*—includes items that ask about parent practices (e.g. How often do you read?) and parents intentionally instruction their child (e.g. How often do you teach your child to print words?). The final factor—*Child Initiated Literacy*—includes items that describe the frequency the child engages in literacy activity on her own (e.g. How often does your child play with books or magazines pretending to read).

Research Question #3: What are the relationships between the family experiences and subsequent literacy related skills (oral language, alphabetic knowledge, and phonological processes) for Latino ELS?

As a first step in examining the relationship between home literacy practices, emergent literacy and literacy achievement we used a zero-order correlation matrix. Grade standardized scores were used when available to partial to age. Since differences were negligible we proceeded to modeling, disregarding age as a factor.

The correlation matrix shows that correlations between the different literacy measures are moderate to high ($r = .27-.93$) and significant with the exception of the research generated vocabulary assessment. The two home literacy practices that emerged as significant correlation with individual literacy assessments were Book Availability that correlated with PreLAS and PPVT measures (both related to language), Child Initiated Literacy correlated with WRAT scores. Both indicated that there is a link between these home practices and literacy. To examine the meaning of the links in the context of the model as a whole we proceeded to a latent model.

In order to test the developmental relationships between home literacy practices and literacy achievement, we developed a latent structural equation model that looked at possible direct influences of different home literacy factors. The model was then constrained to include only significant paths as is shown in Figure 2: Home Literacy Impacts Latent Variable Model.

There were only two significant paths from home literacy factors to subsequent achievement. Book Availability (library and home) was associated with the development of oral language ($\beta = .24$ $t = 3.9$ $p < .001$). The child initiated literacy factor (pretend reading, scribbling) was related directly to phonological processing ($\beta = .20$ $t = 3.2$ $p < .001$). The fit indices for this model were adequate indicating that the model had a close fit to the data, $\chi^2(50) = 174.4$, RMSEA = .03, GFI = .92, CFI = .99. The model explained 8% of the variance in Oral Language, 39% of Alphabetic knowledge and 52% of phonological processing.

Discussion

Students enter kindergarten with varied literacy experiences emerging primarily from the home environment, which can affect their literacy success in the future. While there is a considerable amount of research on family literacy practices, there is very little research on Latino family literacy practices (NELP 2009). This study adds to the limited research on Latino family literacy practices that support the language and literacy skills in the classroom setting.

The relationship between literacy practices at home and children's literacy knowledge are mediated by the phonological processes, oral language, and emergent literacy skills (Sénéchal 2006). The development of emergent literacy skills has been found to be similar for children learning to read in their first language and for those learning to read in a second language (Nicholas et al. 2001). In our research with Latino children and families, we found very similar results. We found that when Latino children initiated literacy through pretending to read and scribbling, this tended to have a direct link to children's phonological processing ability. While our results are correlational, past research has identified some of the causal links. Researchers have repeatedly shown that phonological processes are an important prerequisite and predictor for the literacy acquisition (e.g. Whitehurst and Lonigan 2001). Phonological processes are important to children's ability to identify graphemes (written letters) and letter-sound correspondence (Adams 1990). Particularly, when children come from homes where English is

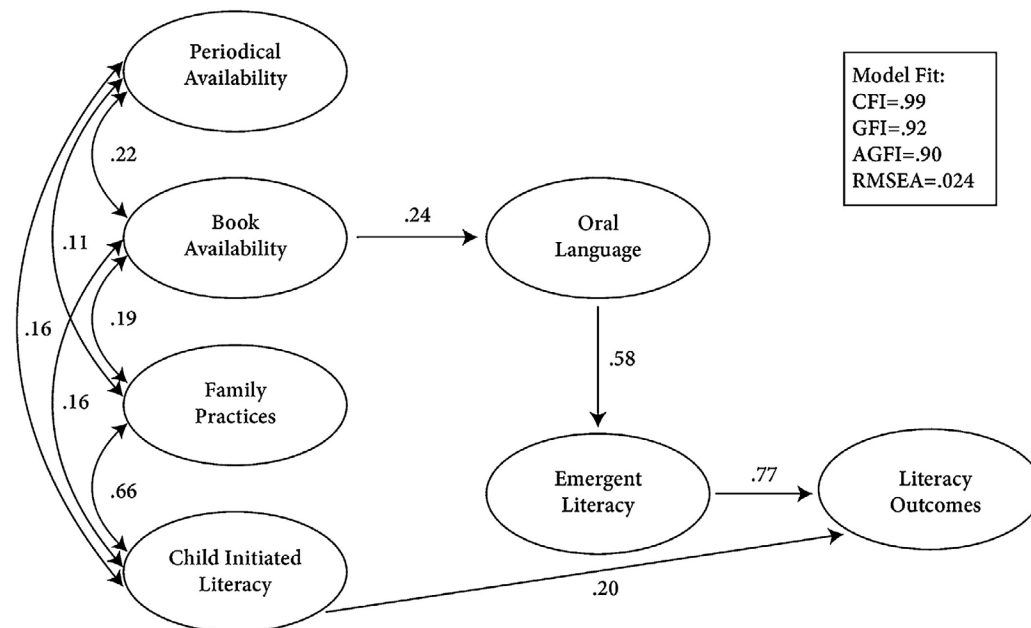


Figure 2. Home literacy impacts latent variable model

not the primarily language spoken, these phonological processes transfer from a child's L1 to their L2 (Dickinson et al. 2004). Language transfer is important because Latino parents can use Spanish in the home literacy activities that ultimately benefits literacy development in English.

Since the family and household often serve as children's first teachers, the home environment plays a critical role in the developing a children's emerging literacy and attitudes towards learning. In this study, we found that Latino parents are providing a literacy environment for their children in the home setting, despite the lack of resources. Despite the low access to books, Latino parents (both mothers and fathers) reported reading to their children once a week. To help support Latino parents, educators and community organizations can provide materials in the native language (e.g. bilingual books, comic books in Spanish, children's books) to parents so that they may assist their children in language and literacy development. We must support parents in such efforts since we know that maintaining a child's first language is an important in facilitating their learning literacy in English, their second language (Burns et al. 1999).

Much research evidence indicates that children's exposure to literacy-related activities at home is important for their literacy foundation (Dickinson and Tabors 2002). This article confirms much of what we know and adds a focus on EL Latino parents and children. As schools enroll more ELs students, it is critical that they are recognized and valued for the variety of literacy activities that are supported in their homes and communities. To find out what is happening in the homes of the children, Moll et al. (1992) found that cultural experiences are rich and often untapped resources. These *funds of knowledge* are essential in listening to the parents and the literacy practices they are supplying their children.

The results of our work show the complex patterns of family literacy, the diversity of practices and their impact on child literacy outcomes. Since we know funds of knowledge brought into the classroom help students learn, teachers need to be much better positioned to learn and build upon their students' home literacy practices. School literacy practices and students' funds of knowledge should not be viewed as separate competencies but instead woven together as the foundational strands of English literacy or, when possible, the bi-literacy of the students. Acknowledging the role of culturally-based home practices and how they mesh with the goal of fostering the emergence of literacy skills in children is an important step for the school systems in general to work closely EL families.

Implications for Practice

With the growing population of young Latino ELs, this article serves the call for more expansive research on ELs. Educators should find multiple ways to learn about their students and the family contexts in which they experience

literacy. Home visits, family nights, and informal conversations during school events can be great ways for educators to learn more about students and their *funds of knowledge*. It is particularly important in assisting to debunk deficit attitudes towards ELs and their families.

Schools and community organizations should try and find ways to make literacy resources available to all in multiple formats. The availability of books, libraries and age appropriate digital media can greatly enhance what parents can do at home to prepare their children for school.

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