

## COLLEGE GRADUATING STUDENTS' GLOBAL ENGLISH PROFICIENCY

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### **Abstract**

English proficiency is often presented as a competitive advantage. According to Miller (2018), those who are communicatively competent are deemed ready and worthy to be absorbed into the existing industries. Using the mixed-method approach, this study investigated the extent of readiness for the world of work of the teacher education graduating students of Leyte Normal University (LNU) during Semester 1, SY2019-2020 by gauging their English proficiency level at two points: before and after the English enhancement training, particularly on listening, reading and grammar. It also aimed to find out how the training improved the participants' English communication skills. The training was conducted from September to November and lasted nineteen (19) hours. It was found out that the participants' level of proficiency in reading, listening and grammar before the English enhancement training was Below Average. Hence, their overall level of English proficiency before the English enhancement training is Below Average. Further, only 22.92% of the participants passed. After the training, their average level of proficiency in reading and listening was still Below Average, but Average in grammar. However, 41.79% passed and 58.20% were able to get better scores in the posttest. Overall, the participants believed that the training helped improve their English communication skills by enhancing their communicative competence and increasing their confidence to speak in English.

**Keywords:** Level of English proficiency, Global English Assessment, Graduating Students, Employability

### **INTRODUCTION**

English language has been the lingua franca of the world and is widely used up to this age (Tocmo, 2018). Global competitiveness is achieved and doors of opportunity and success are widely open to those who are proficient in speaking the language. During job interviews, an interviewee who is articulate can make an impression of being intelligent, knowledgeable, confident, and skillful in everything. His or her communication skill is his or her edge over the other applicants. Likewise, a well-written application letter or business proposal is reflective of a person's education and training and says a lot about his or her extent of readiness for the job. Needless to say, English proficiency offers a competitive advantage ([www.ef.com](http://www.ef.com)).

This is a need which higher education institutions need to address to ensure the employability of their graduates. According to Miller (2018), employability means the readiness and the worthiness to be absorbed into the existing industries. It is an undeniably essential skill that they could put to use anytime and anywhere and because of the new communication challenges they face brought about by social change. Indeed, this poses a challenge to academic institutions all over the globe

particularly in Asia, such as the Philippines, whose main goal is to produce globally competitive graduates – independent, self-managing individuals with the basic knowledge and skills which adequately prepare them for the challenges of life and work in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Ellis, 2013).

Despite of this, results of the 2019 English Proficiency Index (EPI), which measured the average level of English language skills of students aged 13 to 22 all over the world, reveal that the Philippines' proficiency level fell from 14th place in 2018 to 20th in the 2019 (www.ef.com; www.manilatimes.net). If the slide in ranking continues from 13th in 2016 to 14th in 2018 and further down to 20th in 2019, it would have negative consequences for the competitiveness of Filipinos in the global arena. Employers would often turn away job applicants because of their poor English skills.

Likewise, a study by the Hopkins International Partners showed that the level of English proficiency of college graduates from the Philippines was lower than the target English proficiency of high school students in Thailand. Indeed, in the researcher's more than a decade of teaching experience in college, she has encountered a lot of students who could hardly express themselves clearly and logically in English.

The aforementioned data aroused the researcher's curiosity to investigate on the English proficiency level of the graduating students of Leyte Normal University (LNU) during Semester 1, SY 2019 – 2020 and hence, their extent of readiness for the world of work in terms of communication, and to find out the effectiveness of an intervention implemented by ePerformax Contact Centers and BPO in enhancing their language skills. ePerformax has been a partner of LNU since 2016 on training and job placement programs for its students.

The results of the study are expected to give insights on the extent of readiness of students to plunge into the world of work in terms of communication, thereby encouraging LNU administration and English language teachers to continuously provide quality language instruction and language enhancement trainings to its students to keep their competitive edge. This is also expected to have impact on the Career and Job Placement Services of the University.

#### *Framework of the Study*

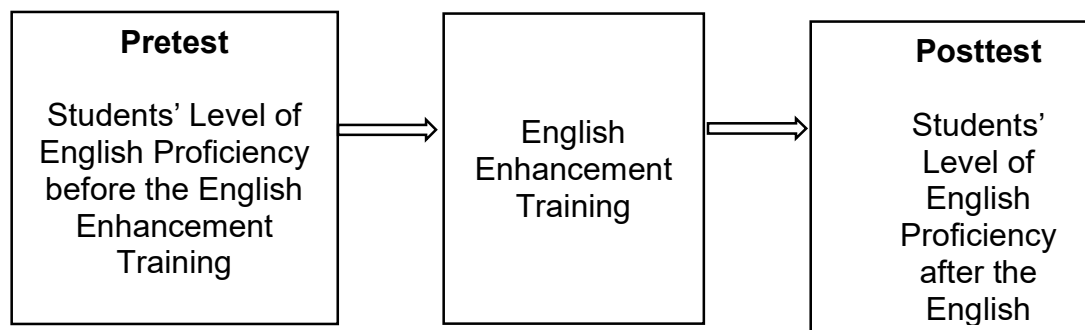
This study is anchored on communicative competence, which is the ultimate goal of language learning. Communicative competence as defined by Carroll (2008) is, of course, the competence or ability to communicate. It concerns both spoken or written language and all four language skills namely, listening, speaking, reading and writing. It is measured in terms of fluency, comprehensibility, effort, and amount of communication in unrehearsed communicative tasks (Murcia, 2006). When one is communicatively competent, he or she is not only ready to connect with the world but he or she can use this ability as a vehicle to learn the rest of the 21<sup>st</sup> century skills as well.

The respondents of this study were expected to have developed communicative competence after almost four years of stay in the university. Whether they have fully developed their listening and reading comprehension skills and have mastered the grammar of the English language would be found out in this study.

The intervention was based on the principles of communicative grammar; that is, structures were not taught in isolation, apart from content and meaning. Both form and function were given equal emphasis in meaningful situations. Thus, grammatical competence was not only the focus of the lessons, but students were also exposed to real-life or authentic listening and reading materials and activities.

The main aim of this study was to explore the effect of the English enhancement training program on increasing students' level of English competence in terms of listening and reading comprehension and grammar. To be able to do so, a pre-assessment of the participants' English proficiency through the Global English Assessment (GEA) was first administered to the participants and the result of which served as the baseline data. Afterwards, language instruction was implemented.

The said instruction was assumed to influence the students' level of competence in the 21<sup>st</sup> century skills (post test results). Meanwhile, the pretest and post test results were compared to measure change or progress in the students' level of competence in English, which indicated the effectiveness of the training program in enhancing students' English language competence.



**Figure 1 Conceptual Diagram**

### *Statement of the Problem*

This study was conducted to determine the English proficiency level of the graduating students of Leyte Normal University at two points in time: at the beginning of the school year and towards the end of the first semester and to find out if there were changes in their scores. It specifically aimed to find answers to the following research questions:

1. What is the English proficiency level of the participants before the English enhancement training in terms of the following?
  - 1.1 Reading
  - 1.2 Listening
  - 1.3 Grammar
2. What is the English proficiency level of the participants after the English enhancement training in terms of the following?
  - 2.1 Reading
  - 2.2 Listening

### 2.3 Grammar

#### 3. How did the training improve the participants' English communication skill?

#### ***Significance of the Study***

This study which intended to quantify the students' progress in listening and reading comprehension and grammar through the GEA provided insights to students, parents, English language teachers and administrators of the present English proficiency level of graduating students. The research findings may influence them to strengthen the language program of the university, to continuously offer the English enhancement training program to graduating students, and to provide supplementary lessons and self-paced learning resources so the students can improve their English and increase their chance of landing a job after graduation.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### ***Research Design***

The present study aimed to respond to the research questions of qualitative and quantitative nature, data collection and analysis techniques from both methodologies, thus mixed-method approach was chosen as the methodology of this research. Mixed-method approach enables the researchers to draw all possibilities (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998) and provide a broader perspective to the study as the qualitative data helps describe aspects that the quantitative data cannot address (Creswell, 2003).

The descriptive method was specifically utilized in answering questions 1 and 2 regarding the level of English proficiency of the graduating students of Leyte Normal University before and after the English enhancement training. It did not attempt to find out if there was a significant relationship between the participants' achievement in the pretest and posttest since only a summary of the test results was made available for the researcher. It is presumed, however, that changes in students' posttest scores could be the result of the training attended.

Meanwhile, a simple qualitative method was used to answer the third question.

### ***Respondents of the Study***

The fourth year college students in one of the state universities in Leyte, Philippines who were not enrolled in any practicum course during the Semester 1, School Year 2019 – 2020 were chosen as the respondents of this study. Those who were having their practice teaching or on-the-job training were not included because of their schedule. The researcher also found it fitting that the graduating students be the subject of the study because they were the ones whose English proficiency needed to be assessed and who needed immediate intervention if found having shortage in this area, considering that they will soon be absorbed into the existing industries or graduate employment.

All in all, there were ninety-six (96) who took the pretest but only sixty-seven (67) saw the program through until the posttest. All of them were Bachelor of Secondary Education (BSED) students with either Filipino, Social Studies, Technology and Livelihood Education (TLE), or Music, Arts, Physical Education and Health (MAPEH) as their field of specialization. They were

fitting subjects of this particular study since there is an urgent need for would-be teachers to be adequately prepared for the battle ahead. While in the training institution, they are expected to acquire and demonstrate communicative competence, which is a necessary attribute of an effective teacher.

### ***Sampling Procedure***

This study made use of purposive sampling technique and complete enumeration, wherein all fourth-year students who were officially enrolled during the first semester of SY 2019 – 2020 but were not having their practice teaching or practicum were taken as respondents. However, only those who were able to take the pretest and those who were able to finish the training course and took the posttest were included in the presentation and analysis of data.

### ***Research Locale***

This study was conducted in one of the state universities in Leyte, Philippines. It has teacher education as its flagship program and is the primary producer of teachers in the region. The intervention or English training course was provided by and conducted at the ePerformax BPO and Call Centers, whose training center in Eastern Visayas is located within the school campus. It has been the university's partner in its training and placement programs since 2016.

### ***Research Instruments***

The main source of data for this study was the Global English Assessment (GEA), which is an ePerformax web-based English assessment tool. It measures the taker's proficiency in reading, listening and grammar and his or her capacity level to transact in English (global.english.com). It consists of 100 items and 75 is considered as the passing score. Raw scores are interpreted as follows: 1-74 -Below Average; 75 - Average; and 76 – 100 - Above Average.

In order to accomplish the third objective of this study, the researcher asked the participants to express in writing their feedback on the training.

### ***Data Gathering Procedure***

The data gathering process began by orienting the respondents on the Global English Assessment and the training course that they would take. This occurred shortly after the opening of the semester (August 2019). The respondents took the pre-assessment in September 2019.

The intervention was implemented after obtaining and analyzing the scores of the respondents in the pre-assessment. Class sessions were scheduled during the students' free time throughout the semester. The training lasted nineteen (19) hours compared to the 240 hours for newly hired call center trainees. The first session consisting of one and a half hour was devoted to the conduct of the pretest and the discussion of the scorecard., while the last one and a half hour was allotted to the posttest and scorecard discussion. Thus, sixteen (16) hours was spent for the training proper.

The training put fundamental emphasis on developing the English proficiency of its takers and encompass listening and reading comprehension and grammar – areas of language which are basic to the achievement of communicative competence, which is the goal of language teaching and

learning. Speaking was also integrated in the training but was not included in the pre- and post-assessment.

The following matrix shows the training design.

Table 1 Training Matrix

Lesson	Time Allotment
Grammar Lesson 1: Parts of Speech, Nouns, Articles	4 hours
Grammar Lesson 2: Subject-Verb Agreement	4 hours
Reading Comprehension: Top-Down and Bottom-Up Strategies	4 hours
Listening Comprehension: Top-Down and Bottom-Up Strategies	4 hours

After they took the posttest, the participants were also asked to write down their feedback on the training and the ideas elicited from them were utilized to answer the third research question.

### *Data Analysis*

The quantitative data that were derived from the pretest-posttest were described using Measure of Central Tendency, specifically Mean, as well as percentages. On the other hand, the qualitative data (participants' feedback on the training) analysis was carried out through thematic coding.

### *Results and Discussion*

This section presents the findings of the study organized according to how they appear in the Statement of the Problem section of Chapter 1.

#### **Participants' level of English proficiency before the English enhancement training**

Out of approximately 1,000 fourth year students during Semester 1 of SY 2019 – 2020, there were ninety-six (96) who took the pretest (Global English Assessment) and all of them were Bachelor of Science in Secondary Education students with either Filipino, Technology and Livelihood Education, or MAPEH as their major.

Result of the pretest shows that the participants possessed Below Average level of English proficiency, or an overall average score of 67.33. Their average scores in Reading, Listening, and Grammar all fall below 75, which is the passing or average score. Of all the test components, they scored highest in Grammar (73) and lowest in listening, although there is only a slight difference between their scores in reading (66) and listening (63). It is worth mentioning here, however, that the highest score was eighty-nine, which is far above the passing score or above average.

It can also be gleaned in the table that only twenty-two (22) or 22.92% of the 96 examinees passed the pretest or garnered a combined score of 75 or above. Among the test components, there were more students who passed the grammar test, which is sixteen (16) or 16.66%, while only ten (10) or 10.41% and twelve (12) or 12.50% of the examinees passed the reading and listening test, respectively.

Table 2  
*Learners' level of English proficiency before the training*

Test Component	f=96	Passed	% Passed	Pretest Score	Mean	Level of Proficiency
Reading	96	10	10.41%	66		Below Average
Listening	96	12	12.50%	63		Below Average
Grammar	96	16	16.66%	73		Below Average
Overall		22	22.92%	67.33		Below Average

This only shows that students generally understand the grammar of the English language, can distinguish a grammatically correct sentence, and can use words correctly in a sentence, but have difficulty in listening and reading comprehension. Hence, it can be inferred that grammar instruction is probably still given more focus in the language classroom at the tertiary level rather than training students on understanding oral and written discourses, or that college students are more exposed to a kind of language instruction that places more emphasis and importance on accuracy rather than on content and meaning.

These data point to the fact that the participants, who are supposed to be on their last year of pre-service education and would soon graduate and search for employment, do not meet the expected level of ability to transact in English, which is an essential skill for workers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

#### **Participants' level of English proficiency after the English enhancement training**

Of the ninety-six (96) takers of the pretest, only sixty-seven saw the program through to the posttest or the second take of the Global English Assessment. However, not all the 67 finishers attended all the training sessions. Out of 67, only forty-three (43) attended the reading lesson, forty-nine (49) attended the session on listening, while fifty-eight (58) were present during the grammar lessons. Overall, around two-thirds of the students were present in all training sessions.

As can be seen in the table, the level of English proficiency of the participants still falls under the category of below average, although their mean score in the posttest (70) increased by almost 3 points compared to their 67.33 mean score in the pretest. The average scores of the participants in the three subtests namely reading, listening and grammar all increased, but it is in grammar that they obtained the highest mean score of seventy-five (75), which is categorized as average, while they consistently scored lowest in listening (66). Except for grammar, their level of proficiency in the other two subskills is still below average after the English enhancement training.

Of the sixty-seven (67) students who took the posttest (inclusive of those who did not attend the training), only twenty-eight (28) or 41.79% achieved a passing score of 75 or above, the highest score in the posttest being 94 as compared to 89 in the pretest. Specifically, approximately twenty-five percent (25%) of the participants passed in each subtest. However, it was noted that among those who did not attend classes but took the posttest, only one was able to get an overall passing score.

Moreover, among those who took both the pretest and posttest, regardless of their attendance in the training, there were thirty-three (33) or 56.90% whose scores in the second take increased compared with their scores during the first take. Thirty-three (33) were able to get a better result in grammar, while twenty-eight (28) and twenty-five (25) were able to increase their scores in reading and listening, respectively. These data do not imply, however, that those who performed better on the second take obtained a passing score in any or all of the test components or a passing overall score.

Table 3

***Participants' level of English proficiency after the training***

Test Component	f=67	Passed	% Passed	Posttest Mean Score	Level of Proficiency	Improved	% Improved
Reading	A – 43 DA - 24	15	22.38%	69	Below Average	28	65.12%
Listening	A – 49 DA - 18	17	25.37%	66	Below Average	25	51.02%
Grammar	A – 58 DA - 7	18	26.86%	75	Average	33	56.90%
Overall		28	41.79%	70	Below Average	39	58.20%

Legend: A - Attended the training                      DA – Did not attend the training

In general, a healthy improvement was seen among the participants who took the GEA both times, especially those who attended the training. While others certainly scored higher, the biggest difference for a passer was a student who went from a score of seventy-one (71) on the first take and received a ninety-four (94) after the training. In general, a healthy improvement was seen among the participants who took the GEA both times, especially those who attended the training. This goes to show that the training was effective in improving students' English language skills.

To provide insights on the effects of the English enhancement training on the enhancement of the participants' English communication skills, a comparison of the pretest and posttest results is hereby presented through the graph that follows.



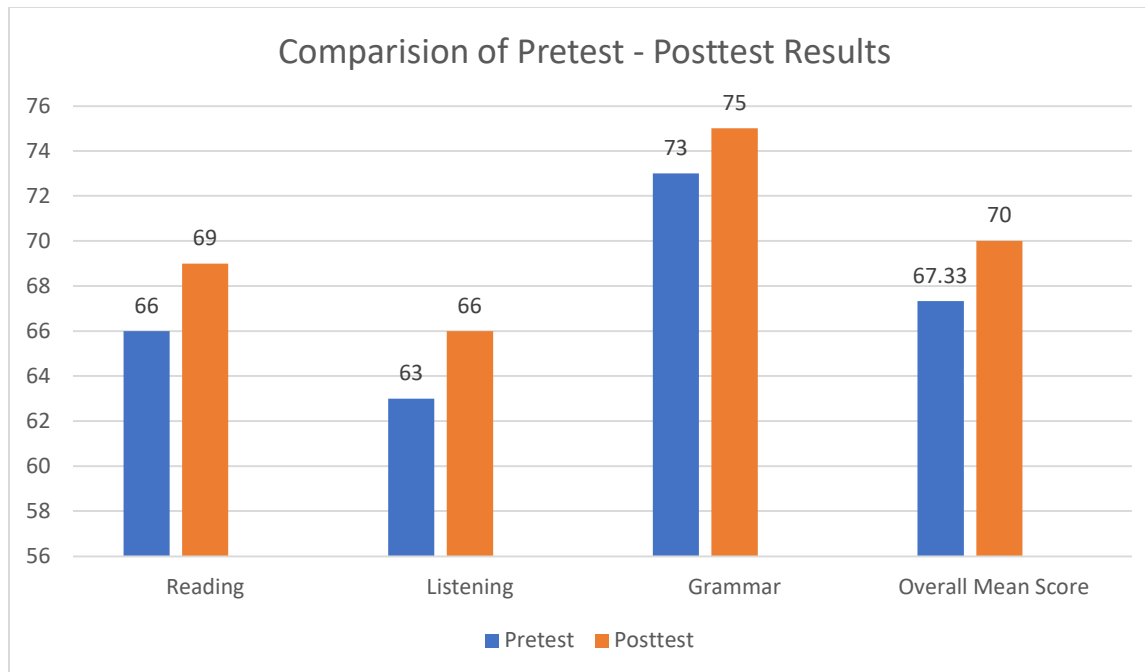


Figure 2

*Comparison of pretest and posttest results*

### **How the training helped improve the participants' communication skills**

After the participants answered the posttest, they were made to write down their feedback on the training, particularly on how it helped them improve their communication skills.

All of them were appreciative of the training. They thought that the teachers were competent trainers and that the teaching strategies used were effective in reinforcing learning so that at the end of the training course, they believed that their English has improved and they have become better communicators. They also pointed out that they benefited much from the training.

#### *Enhanced Communicative Competence*

The participants' shared that they learned a lot from the training which they could put to use during actual communication. For instance, they were able to clarify some issues in grammar, acquire strategies to improve their reading and listening comprehension skills, understand vocabulary words and expressions which they could apply when answering questions, and learn the correct pronunciation of words.

To provide amplification, one of the participants explicitly uttered:  
 "Through this training, I was able to deepen my knowledge about subject-verb agreement, pronounce words accurately, especially the "schwa." It also did help me improve my reading comprehension."

This was confirmed by another participant who said:

"This training is a big help in...enhancing my skill in constructing sentences. It also helped me learn techniques in understanding long paragraphs."

Likewise, another participant explained the benefits she gained from the training.

“Through the training, I was able to know the correct pronunciation of some words which were difficult for me to pronounce before. I also became grammar conscious.”

The participants attributed their improved skill not only to the explicit teachings of grammar, pronunciation, and the like, but also to the constant drill and practice that were given to them every meeting so that they had the opportunity to apply the new grammar structures, expressions, and skills that they learned.

Murcia (2006) posits that this approach is effective in developing students' ability to understand and to express themselves in a foreign or second language; and encourages learners to take risk and to speak with other speakers in the classroom. Eventually, they are able to improve their language facility, acquire a good command of the language, and develop their functional language ability.

#### *Increased Confidence to Speak in English*

Besides improving their English in terms of listening and reading comprehension, grammar and pronunciation, the students also claimed displaying greater confidence in the use of English as evidenced by the way they talked, employed eye contact with the audience, and used bodily movements as support to the message that they wanted to convey. According to them, they were gradually gaining confidence in themselves and in their ability to use English for communication. All of them tried to talk in English when called to recite, although some still struggled with grammar, vocabulary and fluency. One student shared,

“I kind of not shy anymore when talking to someone in English oreven inside the classroom when delivering a report.”

This proves that indeed, constant practice helps establish communication skills and once established, students could feel more confident to use the target language in communication. This is in consonance with the idea elicited from another participant.

“The student training helped me to become more confident in speaking English language with other people. Since I was taught about the proper construction of sentences, pronunciation and a lot more, I was able to express myself confidently with others.”

A similar answer was given out by another participant, who expressed his gratitude for the training he just availed of, since it boosted his intellectual ability and knowledge of the English language. He added,

“Somehow, I can now speak confidently in English and with no hesitation because I have undergone a thorough training on English communication.”

Overall, the participants considered it a privilege that they were given such kind of English enhancement training. It did not only improve their communication skills, but it also boosted their self-confidence. They also learned the value of practice in language learning.

This is supported by active learning, which is a constructivist approach that states that it is what a student does during a teaching and learning episode that has the most value for learning. It requires “intellectual effort, encouraging high-order thinking (analysis, synthesis, evaluation) and provides

learning opportunities for the student to assimilate, apply and retain learning” (Tan, 2007, p. 47). Since language learning is a complex process, activities that promote active learning basically increase motivation and cause learners to learn more.

### **SUMMARY OF FINDINGS, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION**

This section presents the summary of findings which, in turn, served as basis for the conclusion and recommendations that the researcher was able to formulate.

#### *Summary of findings*

1. The participants' level of proficiency in reading, listening and grammar before the English enhancement training is Below Average. Hence, their overall level of English proficiency before the English enhancement training is Below Average.
2. The participants' level of proficiency in reading and listening after the English enhancement training is Below Average but Average in grammar. Their overall level of English proficiency after the English enhancement training is Below Average.
3. The training helped improve the participants English communication skills by enhancing their communicative competence and increasing their confidence to speak in English.

#### *Conclusion*

Majority of the college students who are about to graduate and start their own career have shortage of competence in English and thus, not ready to plunge into the world of work since competence in the use of English is one of the vital skills that employers require of their prospect employees in this present age. Not being able to demonstrate this skill at a satisfactory level would mean failure to show one's worthiness for the job and a slim chance of being hired. Findings of the study also suggest that many school systems, although successful in introducing students to the basics of the English language, are struggling to build competency beyond that level.

Nevertheless, it was proven in the study that attending English enhancement trainings may improve one's English communication skills. This is a need which higher education institutions can provide if they want to produce employable and career-ready graduates.

#### *Recommendations*

Based on the foregoing findings of the study and the generalizations formed, the following recommendations are put forward.

1. Higher education institutions (HEIs) may seriously consider providing an intensive or a series of customized English enhancement trainings to their students, especially to the graduating class, to supplement the knowledge and training that they obtain from their mandatory English courses.
2. English enhancement trainings may also be extended to non-graduating students to give them greater chance of optimizing their potential before completing their college education.
3. Since students seem to have more trouble with listening compared to reading and grammar, language instructors may increase students' exposure to listening activities that foster the development of this skill.
4. Language programs at the tertiary level may be enhanced to suit to the immediate and future needs of the students.

5. A similar study may be conducted but involving a larger population.

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