

Silence in the EFL Classroom

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Abstract. Silence in the language classroom has been the experience of many teachers especially in speaking activities. Silence and its reasons have been investigated in a considerable number of studies in the field of foreign language teaching. The studies have shed light on such aspects as foreign language anxiety, culture, or previous education. This present study aims to explore the reasons why a group of Turkish EFL learners keep silent during the language classes. The study also presents some suggestions for language teachers as to help their students overcome the problem of silence in the language classroom. The study utilizes both qualitative and quantitative research designs. Data collection tools include learner diaries, semi-structured interviews, and a questionnaire.

1. Introduction

1.1 The definition of silence in the language classroom

Many language teachers have experienced uncomfortable silences and have had difficulties making the students more active during the class particularly in speaking activities. Hence, they have endeavoured to find an explanation for the reasons of silence and struggled against the great walls of silence. In Cameron's opinion [1], silence signifies "resistance as well as powerlessness". Saville and Troike associate silence with "timidity, embarrassment, fear and neurosis" [1]. According to Alerby and Elidottir [2], "silence is not to be seen or touched, but is often described as a seen entity; 'silence is golden', 'silence is threatening', 'silent wall', 'silence as a weapon' or 'a silent war'. All these phrases suggest that silence can be seen as a value-laden expression, an intentional action and a metaphor". As for the student's silence, Harumi [3] states that it "can be interpreted as rudeness, laziness, lack of interest, and passivity". On the other hand, Heidegger claims that silence is "constitutive of discourse. It is important to note that to be able to be silent, one must at the same time have something to say" [2]. Bilmes [4] states that "there are as many kinds of silence as there are of relevant sounds". He defines silence in terms of two categories: 'absolute silence', which is the absence of sound and 'notable silence', which is the absence of a particular kind of sound of which one of sub-types is absence of talk and named by Bilmes as 'conversational silence'. Although silence is generally associated with the absence or lack of something, Jaworski suggests that "the term 'silence' can act as a signifier for a number of different states or interrelationships" [1]. For Dauenhauer, silence "have strong symbolic connotations, in that it is used in preference to speech when a particular situation transcends the capacity for verbal expression" [1]. Zembylas and Vrasidas assert that silence is "linked with either non-participation or marginalization" [5]. Flanders links the silence in class to 'periods of confusion in which communication cannot be understood by the observer'" [1].

1.2 The reasons of silence in the language classroom

Silence in the language classroom may stem from different reasons. Alerby and Elidottir [2] state that one of the reasons “can be out of timidity or caution or being afraid to expose one’s self by speaking openly. It can also be when no time or space is given for reflection”. According to Javorski and Sachdev [4], “high levels of anxiety (associated with students’ lack of confidence) in the classroom” may result in silence “regardless of the cultural background of students and the teaching objectives.” Tok [6] associates silence with “anxiety and unwillingness”. Agreeing with Tok, Burgoon claims that this unwillingness shows itself in different forms such as “apprehension, low self-esteem, lack of communicative competence, alienation, anomie and introversion” [6]. Tok [6] adds that this anxiety results from “the students’ concern about making mistakes particularly in front of their friends.” In addition, Song suggests “culture and previous education were possible factors to be blamed for students’ silence” [7]. Similarly, Tatar [8] suggests that in Turkish culture being silent is a good attribute for a child and there is little emphasis on talk and discussion in Turkish education system. She adds “[s]imilarly, in the classroom, the student is expected to listen, respond only when asked a question, and not ask questions, an act that might be perceived as a threat to the teacher’s authority”. For Liu and Mou [7], the causes behind silence “vary from students’ attitudes, anxiety, language proficiency, to pedagogical and socio-cultural factors.” Zembylas and Vrasidas [5] assert that students may remain silent in the classroom for many reasons: “they may have nothing to say; they may feel that their ideas are not valued and thus choose to remain silent; they may feel insecure and shy; they may be “disciplined” by the teacher; or they may need more time to think and reflect.” Boler suggests three possible reasons why students are silent in class – they may be shy, they may be resistant to the dominant discourse within that setting or they may be involved in a reflective and engaged silence [1]. As Harumi highlights [3], “there are other factors which students expressed in relation to their cultural value and identity” along with “low-proficiency, general anxiety, shyness, and unfamiliar methods or approaches”. According to Hu and Fell-Eisenkraft [9], silence results from “being shy”, “fear of not having the correct answers” or “unfamiliarity with talking to learn”. Hu explicates:

I often hear the word “shy” being used as a general label to characterize those who display a tendency to remain silent in class discussions. However, according to McCroskey (1991), shyness is a behavior that could be the result of any one or a combination of the following seven factors: skill deficiencies, social introversion, social alienation, ethnic/cultural divergence, unfamiliarity with academic discourse, lacking confidence in subject matter, and/or communication apprehension.

Jordan [10] also notes that students find it difficult to participate in academic discussion owing to the “difficulty in comprehension of spoken English (e.g. when speakers speak too fast and use difficult vocabulary), the pressing need to formulate a contribution quickly (e.g. cannot think of what to say), and inability to formulate an idea in English”. Tsui [11] adds that the reasons contributing to the lack of students’ participation are the students’ low English proficiency; their fear of making mistakes and being ridiculed by classmates; the teachers’ intolerance of silence, which leads to a very short wait time for students to think about the question and come with an answer; the unequal speaking opportunities afforded to each student by the teacher; and the overly difficult teachers’ language input.”

2. Studies on silence in the language classroom

Although there is limited research on Turkish students, silence has been researched in a considerable number of studies in the field of learning English as a foreign language all around the world and there

have been some major findings. Tok [6] investigated Turkish EFL learners' communication obstacles in English language classrooms and found out that main obstacles of communication are anxiety and unwillingness of which level changes according to gender and the department of study. In another study by Liu and Mou [7], the causes and cultural meanings of silence in an ethnographic study of silence behaviors among postgraduate Chinese students in the EFL classrooms were explored and the study yielded that Chinese students' silence behaviors are influenced by Chinese cultural notions of face, power and shame in social relationships. Harumi [3] investigated the use of silence by Japanese learners of English in cross-cultural communication during a transitional time of globalization. The findings of the study indicated that there are learners who express themselves when they are addressed personally due to culturally different expectations. Their expected classroom behavior differs from the Western pedagogical perspective which allows learners to compete for turns, or volunteer in order to express themselves.

In addition, students' own perceptions on their verbal behavior were studied by Hu and Eisenkraft [9]. They found out that children from Southeast Asian countries talk less. The reason behind such a finding is rooted in their cultural emphasis on obedience and deemphasis of the individual–two central tenets Confucian ethics uses to maintain the social hierarchy. The effect of their culture on language learning was quite interesting:

They don't have to verbalize their choices or decisions, which are often made for them by adults. Nor do they need to speak up to defend their action if they are to obey their parents. Similarly, at school the children are expected to listen to their teachers, take notes, and memorize. They do not have to talk to make meaning; the meaning is made for them and transmitted to them by the teachers.

Yıldırım [12] studied foreign language anxiety in listening and speaking activities during the language classes since she believed that foreign language anxiety is closely related to the reasons of silence. She found out that various reasons cause this anxiety and some of them may be listed as lack of practice during their high school education, the negative effect of both teacher and peer observation and evaluation, and feeling inadequate and incompetent due to not having a large repertoire of words and full grammatical mastery as well as not being able to pronounce the words correctly. Subaşı [13] investigated the effects of two psychological factors, the fear of negative evaluation and the self-perception of speaking ability in the target language as they were said to be potential sources of anxiety in the classroom. The findings of the study confirmed empirically that they were indeed anxiety-provoking in a FL classroom and revealed that there is an interaction between dispositional fear of negative evaluation and self-perceived speaking ability. Jackson [14] studied the reticence of Chinese students in four sections of an English-medium undergraduate business course in Hong Kong. She found that what hold the students back from participation in discussions were “their fear of losing face, their lack of self-confidence in English or their ideas, and the passive habits they acquired during previous school experiences.”

3. Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This section presents an overview of the research methodology. It contains an account of the procedures used in the study, including research questions, design of the study, selection and description of the participants, the instruments used for data collection and data analysis.

3.2 Research question

In this study, responses to the following question were sought:

1. Why do Turkish EFL students keep silent during language classrooms?

3.3 Design of the study

As to find out the reasons why Turkish EFL students of English remain silent, the present study adopted both quantitative and qualitative data collection design. The qualitative data were collected through interview and diaries of the students. The quantitative data were obtained through questionnaire. The reason for using three methods of data collection which is a core aspect of mixed-method research methodology was to achieve triangulation of the data. Denzin [15] defines triangulation as "the combination of methodologies in the study of the same phenomenon". Hence the use of triangulation provides accuracy in reporting findings. In addition, "triangulation has vital strengths and encourages productive research. It heightens qualitative methods to their deserved prominence and, at the same time, demonstrates that quantitative methods can and should be utilized in complementary fashion" [16].

3.4 Participants

The participants of the current study were 50 Turkish students learning English as a foreign language (EFL). All the participants were enrolled in Preparatory School of a private university in İstanbul at the time of the study. The participants ranged in age from 18 to 27. There were considerably more male learners (N=37) than female learners (N= 13) among the participants of the study. The participants were mostly majored in engineering and law.

3.5 Instruments

As to search into the reasons why Turkish EFL students keep silent during language classes, the data were obtained through questionnaire, semi-structured interviews, and diaries of the participants. Both quantitative and qualitative analyses were used. In the following section, detailed information about these instruments will be given.

3.5.1 Questionnaire

The written questionnaire was designed for Turkish EFL students having difficulties in speaking English during language classes. Questionnaires were given to 50 participants to explore the reasons for being silent in the language classes, particularly in speaking activities. The questionnaire was mixed type involving 23 close-ended questions and 1 open-ended question as "Other" in which the participants could write their own opinions in case the reasons provided were incomplete or inappropriate for them. The questionnaire comprised of two sections in which internal and external reasons were placed. For the 23- item questionnaire, a 5-point Likert scale was applied: 1.Strongly disagree, 2.Disagree, 3.Not sure, 4.Agree, and 5.Strongly agree. The language of the questionnaire was Turkish in order to avoid any unclear points or misunderstanding on the part of the participants. The questions were generated by the researcher of the study. However, the questionnaire was piloted to see whether the questions were clear. The questionnaire was administered to 10 students enrolled in English Preparatory School of a private university in İstanbul. The feedback received from the students was used to modify some of the items that caused ambiguity for the students.

3.5.2 Interview

In addition to the questionnaire, face-to-face interviews with the participants were conducted. One advantage of using interviews is that "the interviewer can probe the interviewee for clarity or for more

detailed information when needed. This is an advantage of interviews as compared with questionnaires where interviewer probing is not possible” [17]. In addition, “the way in which a response is made (the tone of voice, facial expression, hesitation, etc.) can provide information that a response would conceal” [18]. The purpose of conducting interviews was to clarify the points that seemed unclear to the researcher and give the participants a chance to modify their views. The interviews were semi-structured. In accordance with the participants’ wish to conduct the interviews in their native language, all interviews were conducted in Turkish. Each student was interviewed once face to face and asked the questions which they marked on the questionnaire as “not sure” again. It is revealed that some of the students marked this option, because they were not able to understand the question clearly. In this case, their answers were corrected accordingly. In addition, the reasons of their silence have been elaborated. Each interview lasted between 10-20 minutes. The participants were interviewed by the researcher of the study.

3.5.3 Diary

The third instrument for data collection was the diaries of the participants. After the interviews had been conducted, each student was asked to keep a diary for one month and write the reasons and their feelings whenever they were not able to speak English during the lessons. The length of each diary was not limited. The participants kept their diaries in Turkish. Diaries are quite useful in research in the sense that “they can provide personal insights not attainable by other means. The researcher's range is broadened, and more data is provided to enhance, fill out and/or challenge data gained in other ways” [19]. The diaries used in this study aimed to clarify the participants’ experiences and their feelings during language classrooms since they are “quite useful to attain inner voices of learners” [20].

3.6 Procedure

In this study, data were collected through three instruments: written questionnaires, interviews, and diaries of the participants. A variety of data sources served to ensure data triangulation. The questionnaires were given to the participants in a classroom setting. The participants were asked to complete the questionnaires, which took them approximately 20-30 minutes. In order to avoid any unclear points or misunderstanding on the part of the participants, the language of the questionnaire was Turkish. In addition to the questionnaires, each participant was asked to participate in the semi-structured interviews. In accordance with the participants’ wish to conduct the interviews in their native language, all interviews were conducted in Turkish. All interviews were recorded in order to gather accurate information. After the interviews were conducted, the participants were asked to keep diaries for 1 month and write their experiences and feelings at once whenever they were unable to speak English during language classes. Participants attended 20 lessons a week of Main Course given by 3 different lecturers.

3.7 Data analysis and findings

This part lays out the results of the questionnaire, interview and diary data which were subjected to both quantitative and qualitative analyses. For the quantitative part item by item analysis was used and the analysis was conducted by using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) program.

Table 1 displays the findings of learner-based reasons and instructor/classroom atmosphere based reasons for students’ silence in the language classroom.

Table 1. Reasons for silence in the classroom

Items	Learner-based reasons	1		2		3		4		5	
		F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
1	I don't have a sufficient vocabulary.	3	6	6	12	10	20	18	36	13	26
2	I can't express myself sufficiently in English.	3	6	7	14	9	18	19	38	12	24
3	I can't translate what I hear in English into Turkish.	10	20	18	36	13	26	8	16	1	2
4	I can't understand what people say.	7	14	23	46	13	26	5	10	2	4
5	I am afraid of making grammatical mistakes.	14	28	13	26	8	16	10	20	5	10
6	I don't have self-confidence.	16	32	9	18	10	20	7	14	8	16
7	I feel too nervous.	11	22	11	22	7	14	10	20	11	22
8	I am shy.	21	42	14	28	8	16	2	4	5	10
9	I feel rushed when pressured to speak.	10	20	14	28	6	12	8	16	12	24
10	My level of English is not sufficient.	5	10	9	18	12	24	14	28	10	20
11	I have difficulty in getting called on in class.	18	36	16	32	11	22	3	6	2	4
12	I don't trust my own ideas.	25	50	18	36	3	6	1	2	3	6
13	I answer in my mind. I don't need to say it out loud.	21	42	10	20	6	12	8	16	5	10
14	I fear pronunciation mistakes.	14	28	17	34	5	10	7	14	7	14
15	Others already say what I plan to say.	14	28	10	20	13	26	9	18	4	8
16	I speak too much, I want to give someone else a chance.	27	54	16	32	4	8	3	6	0	0
17	I feel lack of confidence because of my classmates or classroom atmosphere. I feel that I'm being judged.	23	46	16	32	4	8	4	8	3	6
Items	Instructor/Classroom Atmosphere based reasons	1		2		3		4		5	
		F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
18	Not enough time is given to digest the information and answer.	6	12	14	28	16	32	9	18	5	10
19	Opportunities to speak are not allocated equally.	21	42	20	40	2	4	5	10	2	4
20	I have difficulty in timing. Others speak before I do.	16	32	14	28	8	16	8	16	4	8
21	The teacher overlooks me and my quiet voice.	26	52	15	30	7	14	1	2	1	2
22	I don't speak because of a stressful classroom atmosphere.	25	50	15	30	5	10	1	2	4	8
23	The teacher corrects my mistakes in a humiliating way.	38	76	6	12	2	4	3	6	1	2

1:Strongly disagree 2:Disagree 3:Not sure 4:Agree 5:Strongly agree

The most frequently stated learner-based reasons are insufficient vocabulary, insufficient level of English and difficulty in expressing themselves sufficiently in English.

When we look at the frequencies for item 1, we see that more than half of the students don't speak English due to the lack of vocabulary (strongly agree: 13; 26% and agree: 18; 36%). The reasons for such a finding might be due to the lack of importance given to 'vocabulary teaching' by language teachers. From what the participants stated during the interviews, the lack of review over or practice on the newly learned vocabulary seems like another reason:

"Even if I know the right word, I can't make a sentence. I don't know the sentence order. I don't know where to put the word in a sentence."

"Actually I know the word. But I couldn't recall while speaking."

"I forget the word because I simply don't use it."

The extracts obtained from participants' diaries provide a better explanation for the reasons why they keep silent. The extracts are as follows:

"Because my vocabulary is bad, I couldn't make clear in my mind what I was going to say. While I was trying, the conversation was over."

"I couldn't remember the word which I know very well. I think I need to practice more."

However, Yoshikava [21] found that vocabulary is not related much to speaking performance but variables such as intrinsic motivation, willingness to communicate, self-evaluation of speaking ability and expectation affect the speaking of foreign language learners. Unlike Yoshikava, Koizumi [22] reported strong relationship between vocabulary knowledge and overall speaking performance. Kouzumi [23] also claim that in speaking performance declarative knowledge of vocabulary is important, but this is not enough. Procedural knowledge of vocabulary is also needed. In other words, that vocabulary must be automatic through repeated practice.

When we look at the findings for item 10, it is clear to see that only 28% of the students; that is, 14 of the participants (strongly disagree: f=5; disagree: f=9), seem to believe that their level of English is sufficient. 24 of the students stated that their level of English is not sufficient to communicate (strongly agree: f=10; agree: f=14). In addition, 12 of the participants are not sure whether their level of English is enough or not to communicate. We can assume that the students have an understanding that communicating in a foreign language means speaking perfectly in terms of grammar and vocabulary. During the interviews, what participants stated also displays that being in the same classroom with higher level students makes them feel insufficient:

"In order to speak a foreign language fluently, you have to be in advanced level."

"It's OK when I'm speaking to people who I'm at the same level with. But it's a problem while talking to people whose levels are higher than mine."

Liu and Jackson [24] found that students' underestimated self-perceived competence in English make them believe that they cannot learn or perform in the target language. He suggests that EFL teachers find out how students self-rate their own English proficiency at the beginning of a course and help increase their students' self-perceived competence in English using this knowledge.

The answers for the second item showed that a great number of students can't express themselves sufficiently in English (strongly agree: f=12; agree: f=19). When asked during the interviews, the participants commented as follows:

"I can't express myself in English as well as in Turkish. When I'm asked a question, I can't answer as quickly as in Turkish especially when I'm sleepy. So I don't speak."

"If I'm supposed to talk promptly, I can't do it. I need some time to think about what I'm going to say. I feel I need to be sure before I start talking."

"I think the reasons why I can't express myself sufficiently in English are inattentiveness, lack of motivation and lack of vocabulary. But they don't affect me negatively when I speak Turkish."

Through the interview reports, we can see that the reason why the participants can't express themselves sufficiently in English is related with speaking promptly, that is, speaking without thinking. In his diary, one of the participants wrote about his being unable to express himself

sufficiently in English as follows:

“I can’t speak English during classes, because I’m not used to it. Even at High School we had English lessons in Turkish. Also, there is no one speaking English outside the school. So we are still in the phase of getting used to it.”

Another participant recorded in her diary the following:

“I can’t be sure if what I have said will have the effect of what I want to say.”

The findings of Jordan [25] shows that “the most persistent problem for the students [is] the inability to express themselves adequately in spoken English. One factor was that..the students spent little time in actually speaking English in a typical day, i.e. there seemed to be little opportunity to practice”. Ortega [26] also found that students find it challenging to have oral discussions in English and “ten students out of the 12 interviewed showed concern for their inability to express themselves adequately in the spoken language”. As the focus group discussion extracts presented by Ortega show that “the students felt their knowledge of English was limited particularly at a conversational level because the instructional approach in Spanish secondary education did not encourage oral interaction”.

On the other hand, wish to give someone else a chance to speak, doubt about their own ideas and feeling shy are among the least frequently stated learner-based reasons.

Item 16 elicited the frequency of the students’ participation in speaking. According to the table, only a few participants believe that they speak too much and want to give someone else a chance (strongly agree: f=0; agree: f=3). In Jackson’s [14] study, some students expressed their “concern about how their peers would regard them if they spoke up frequently in class or had lengthy responses. They did not want to be labeled as a “show-off””.

The answers for the twelfth item showed that 36% of the participants disagreed and 50% strongly disagreed that they don’t speak English during language classes since they don’t trust their own ideas. Here the total number of the students who are not sure, who agree and strongly agree is considerably smaller than the number of the students who trust their own ideas (not sure: f=3; agree: f= 1; strongly agree: f=3). When interviewed, the participants stated that they have no problem if they are familiar with the topic and the teacher. If the teacher is new, they can’t speak, first they need to know him/her.

As for the effect of shyness on speaking, item 8 revealed that being shy is not an obstacle to speak for the great majority of the students (strongly disagree-disagree: 70%). During the interviews, the participants stated that their shyness depends on the teacher. If the teacher feels comfortable and make them comfortable, students don’t feel shy.

The most frequently stated instructor/classroom atmosphere based reasons are insufficient time to digest the information and answer, and difficulty in timing.

The results for item 18 indicated that 12% of the participants strongly disagreed and 28% disagreed that not enough time is given to digest the information and answer. These percentages appear to show that 40% of the participants believe that given time is enough. However, the percentage of the participants who strongly agreed and agreed is 28%, and 16% of the participants are not sure whether it is enough or not. We can conclude that this item verifies the existence of time problem which can be associated with over-sized classes as explained in the following interview extracts:

“While speaking, I need time in the subjects which I need time even in my mother tongue.”

“Because time is limited, I can’t answer at that moment. I think about it afterwards and ask

myself why I couldn't answer that question."

Jackson [14] found that some students "needed more time to think about a question since they were formulating a response in Chinese that they would then need to translate." Tsui [11] also adds that being pushed to answer questions literally within seconds by teachers "frighten the students, stop them thinking and suppress their wish to answer the questions."

The responses given to item 20 revealed that more than half of the students don't have difficulty in timing (strongly disagree: f=16; disagree. f=14). However, 24% of the participants can't speak since the other students speak before s/he does (strongly agree: 8%; agree: 16%). The reasons why almost one fourth of the students can't manage timing might be attributed to English level differences among the students in the same classroom as can be seen in the interview extracts below:

"There is a difference as per capacity and level in the classroom. While I am still trying to understand the question, somebody speaks."

"I'm slower and passive compared to other students in the classroom. I understand late."

"Other students think fast and answer back quickly. I know fewer words and I can't speak."

In Jackson's [14] study, some students blame their instructors for this situation. They complain that their instructor frequently selected the same students for questions or did not allow them enough time to think when singled out for a question and were then too quick to jump in and provide a response".

On the other hand, the fear of being corrected by the teacher in a humiliating way is the least frequently instructor/classroom atmosphere stated reason.

As for the effect of teacher's attitude on students' silence, findings for item 23 reveal that only a few students stated that the teacher corrected his/her mistakes in a humiliating way (agree: f=3, strongly agree: f=1). On the other hand, 88% of the participants didn't agree with this item. One of the participants wrote in his diary the following:

"Mostly I don't speak because of the teachers. They always correct me and interrupt me while talking, which disinclines me. Their behaviours lead me to not talking anymore."

It can be concluded that error correction can be regarded as humiliating or frustrating by the students when it's overused. What is worse, this may cause the student not to speak at all. As Hilleson [27] suggests, "while oral activities [are] more stress-inducing than low-exposure activities, the teacher's attitude to errors and the personal characteristics of the instructor (humor, patience, degree of positive feedback, etc.) seemed important to the learners".

4. Conclusions and implications

This study has attempted to investigate the reasons of silence in the language classroom and yielded important insights with the help of the data collected through diaries, interviews and a questionnaire. First, the results of this study indicated that language learning anxiety is not the only or the most important reason of students' silence as it has been widely accepted. Many different factors contribute to silence in foreign language classrooms.

Second, the study showed that one of various impediments in learner's improvement of speaking ability is lack of linguistic competency. Participants declared that their wish to speak a foreign

language with the most accurate grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation as they do in their own language caused them to remain silent in language classes. Learners should understand that language errors are a normal and indispensable part of language learning process. Improvement can only be achieved through participation in classroom activities and discussions, and errors lead to improvement.

The participant responses also showed that time problem contributed to students' silence in language classes. Limited time allocated to answer a question caused students to develop negative attitude towards speaking activities.

Finally, the study indicated that psychological problems especially lack of confidence caused students to remain silent in language classes. There are various factors contributing to learner's lack of confidence, and through the participant responses some of them may be listed as starting to learn the language late, previous language learning experiences and large classes. To gain confidence, learners should practice speaking English in and outside the classroom, with different people and in different situations. Teachers should help these students to build up their self confidence by providing suitable classroom activities such as interactive group discussions and giving them the opportunity to speak.

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