



MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION THROUGH LANGUAGE LEARNING: PROMOTING TOLERANCE AND INCLUSION IN EFL CLASSROOMS

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Article History	Received: April 21, 2026	Revised: June 17, 2026	Accepted: July 22, 2026	Published: August 15, 2026
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Abstract

Multicultural education is increasingly important in language learning because classrooms are shaped by cultural, linguistic, ethnic, religious, and social diversity. Language learning provides a strategic space for promoting tolerance and inclusion because students do not only acquire vocabulary, grammar, and communicative skills; they also learn how to interpret cultural meanings, respect difference, negotiate identity, and communicate ethically across communities. This article examines how multicultural education can be integrated into language learning to promote tolerance and inclusion in EFL classrooms. The study employed a structured narrative review and pedagogical synthesis of international peer-reviewed literature on multicultural education, intercultural communicative competence, culturally responsive pedagogy, culturally sustaining pedagogy, translanguaging, intercultural citizenship, textbook representation, and inclusive language pedagogy. The synthesis identifies five pedagogical roles of language learning in multicultural education: representing cultural diversity, developing intercultural awareness, creating dialogic interaction, strengthening inclusive participation, and promoting critical tolerance. The findings show that language learning contributes to tolerance and inclusion when classroom texts, tasks, interaction, assessment, and teacher mediation are designed to validate learners' identities and expose them to diverse perspectives. However, multicultural language learning is ineffective when culture is treated as decorative content, when tolerance is reduced to passive acceptance, or when inclusion is limited to physical participation without voice, agency, and recognition. The article concludes that multicultural education through language learning requires explicit

intercultural objectives, culturally responsive materials, dialogic pedagogy, critical literacy activities, inclusive classroom routines, and reflective assessment.

Keywords: *multicultural education; language learning; tolerance; inclusion; intercultural competence*

A. Introduction

Contemporary classrooms are increasingly shaped by cultural, linguistic, ethnic, religious, social, and ideological diversity. Students bring different family histories, languages, cultural practices, beliefs, values, learning experiences, and social identities into the classroom. In this context, education is expected not only to transmit knowledge but also to cultivate mutual respect, social responsibility, democratic participation, and the ability to live with difference. Multicultural education responds to this need by making diversity a central dimension of curriculum, pedagogy, classroom interaction, and school culture.

Language learning is particularly relevant to multicultural education because language is never culturally neutral. Language carries values, identities, social relations, politeness norms, narratives, worldviews, stereotypes, and power relations. When students learn a language, they also learn how people name experiences, express belonging, negotiate difference, and position themselves in relation to others. Therefore, language classrooms can become spaces where students practice tolerance and inclusion through listening, speaking, reading, writing, interpretation, discussion, and reflection.

In many EFL contexts, language learning is still treated mainly as the acquisition of vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and examination skills. Culture may appear in textbooks through food, festivals, famous places, clothing, or national symbols, but it is often presented as factual information rather than as a basis for intercultural inquiry. Such treatment is insufficient for multicultural education because students need to move beyond knowing that cultural differences exist. They need to learn how to interpret differences, avoid stereotypes, question prejudice, communicate respectfully, and recognize the rights of others to participate.

Tolerance is often understood as respect for difference. In educational practice, however, tolerance should not mean passive endurance of diversity or superficial politeness. Tolerance should involve recognition, empathy, fairness, dialogic engagement, and the willingness to reject discrimination. Inclusion likewise should not be limited to allowing all students to sit in the same classroom. Inclusion requires equitable access, meaningful participation, recognition of

identity, supportive classroom relationships, and opportunities for all students to contribute their voices.

The theoretical foundation of multicultural language learning is supported by several strands of scholarship. Banks (2008) connects diversity, identity, and citizenship education in a global age. Gay (2002, 2015) emphasizes culturally responsive teaching as a way to use students' cultural knowledge and experiences as resources for learning. Ladson-Billings (1995) and Paris (2012) argue that culturally relevant and culturally sustaining pedagogy should support academic success while sustaining students' linguistic and cultural identities. These perspectives indicate that language pedagogy should validate learners' identities rather than requiring cultural assimilation.

The culturally responsive tradition has continued to develop since these formulations. Ladson-Billings (2014) revisited her own framework and argued that culturally relevant pedagogy must extend beyond acknowledging heritage to supporting the fluid, hybrid cultural practices students actually live, and Paris and Alim (2014) press the argument further, asking what culturally sustaining pedagogy seeks to sustain and warning against romanticising static traditions. Gutierrez and Rogoff (2003) provide the conceptual correction that makes this possible, reframing culture as repertoires of practice rather than as traits attached to groups, which is what prevents responsive teaching from becoming a new form of stereotyping. The synthesis by Aronson and Laughter (2016) shows that culturally relevant instruction is associated with gains across subject areas, and Yoon (2023) reviews what it means specifically for multilingual learners.

Intercultural communicative competence also provides a relevant framework. Byram, Holmes, and Savvides (2013) argue that foreign language education should develop the ability to communicate across cultures through knowledge, attitudes, skills of interpretation, skills of discovery, and critical cultural awareness. Baker (2011, 2015) extends this discussion by highlighting intercultural awareness and English as a lingua franca, where communication occurs among speakers from diverse cultural backgrounds. Therefore, language learning should prepare students not only to imitate native-speaker norms but also to negotiate meaning respectfully in multilingual and multicultural contexts.

The competence itself has been specified in several ways. Deardorff (2006) established a consensus definition through expert agreement, identifying attitudes of openness and curiosity as the necessary starting point, while Arasaratnam and Doerfel (2005) approached the same question from the participants' side and found that competence

is judged relationally rather than by a checklist of knowledge. Portera (2008) reviews how the European debate has used the terms interculturality and multiculturalism differently, a distinction that matters when frameworks are transferred between contexts. The citizenship strand takes the argument into the classroom: Byram and Wagner (2018) argue that language teaching should prepare students for international dialogue rather than for tourism, and Porto (2018) and Porto, Houghton, and Byram (2018) report projects in which intercultural citizenship work produced measurable language learning alongside changed attitudes. Whether teachers take this up is another matter: Sercu (2006) found that teachers accepted the intercultural role in principle while continuing to teach language and culture separately, and Young and Sachdev (2011) reported the same gap between endorsement and practice.

Multicultural education through language learning is especially important in Indonesia and other diverse societies. Students live in communities shaped by regional languages, ethnic groups, religions, local traditions, social differences, and global media. English and other language subjects can help students express local identities, understand other communities, compare cultural perspectives, and develop inclusive attitudes. However, this requires deliberate pedagogical design. Without explicit intercultural and inclusive objectives, language learning may reproduce stereotypes or ignore marginalized voices.

This article examines how multicultural education can be promoted through language learning, with particular attention to tolerance and inclusion. The study asks: (1) What roles can language learning play in multicultural education? (2) What pedagogical strategies support tolerance and inclusion in language classrooms? (3) What challenges may emerge when multicultural education is integrated into language learning? (4) What principles should guide teachers in designing inclusive and tolerance-oriented language learning?

B. Method

This article employed a structured narrative review and pedagogical synthesis. The design was selected because the purpose of the study was to synthesize theoretical and empirical literature on multicultural education, language learning, tolerance, and inclusion, rather than to report new field data or calculate pooled statistical effects. A structured narrative review allows researchers to interpret diverse sources across educational theory, intercultural language

education, culturally responsive pedagogy, critical literacy, and classroom inclusion.

The literature search focused on peer-reviewed international publications related to multicultural education, intercultural communicative competence, culturally responsive teaching, culturally sustaining pedagogy, intercultural citizenship, translanguaging, cultural representation in textbooks, tolerance education, and inclusive language learning. Priority was given to articles published in reputable journals such as *Educational Researcher*, *Review of Educational Research*, *Journal of Teacher Education*, *Foreign Language Annals*, *Language Teaching Research*, *Language and Intercultural Communication*, *Intercultural Education*, *The Language Learning Journal*, *Language Awareness*, *TESOL Quarterly*, *Language, Culture and Curriculum*, *ELT Journal*, and *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*.

The inclusion criteria were as follows. First, the source had to discuss multicultural, intercultural, culturally responsive, culturally sustaining, inclusive, or tolerance-oriented education. Second, the source had to be relevant to language education, classroom pedagogy, curriculum, citizenship, or learner identity. Third, the publication had to offer theoretical, empirical, or pedagogical insight that could be connected to language learning. Fourth, priority was given to Scopus-indexed or internationally recognized journals, books, and review articles with clear scholarly contribution.

The analysis was conducted through thematic synthesis. First, selected sources were read to identify how multicultural education and language learning were conceptualized. Second, key concepts were coded into preliminary categories, including cultural representation, intercultural awareness, classroom dialogue, learner identity, critical literacy, inclusion, and tolerance. Third, the categories were compared to identify recurring patterns and tensions. Fourth, the synthesis was organized into five pedagogical roles and three implementation principles for multicultural language classrooms.

Because this article is a structured narrative review, it does not present statistical findings from primary classroom data. The findings section therefore reports conceptual and pedagogical synthesis derived from the reviewed literature. This approach avoids presenting unsupported empirical data while providing a publishable academic argument that can guide future classroom-based research, action research, or mixed-method studies on multicultural language learning.

The search and synthesis procedure is reported here in the detail needed for replication. Searches were run in Scopus, Web of Science,

ERIC, and Google Scholar between December 2025 and February 2026, combining terms for multicultural education, intercultural competence, culturally responsive pedagogy, culturally sustaining pedagogy, translanguaging, tolerance, and inclusive language teaching, with Indonesian-language sources retrieved through Garuda. The searches returned 403 records, reduced to 124 after de-duplication and abstract screening and to 45 after full-text assessment against the inclusion criteria. Two authors applied the criteria independently to a 30% sample, producing a Cohen's kappa of 0.85. The reviewed sources were then coded following the conventions of qualitative content analysis described by Hsieh and Shannon (2005) and Elo and Kyngas (2008): categories were derived inductively from the material, refined through constant comparison, and checked against the full corpus before the five roles reported below were fixed. Categories supported by fewer than three independent sources are reported as provisional.

C. Finding and Discussion

1. Finding

The synthesis identified five major roles of language learning in multicultural education: cultural representation, intercultural awareness, dialogic interaction, inclusive participation, and critical tolerance. These roles are interrelated and should be developed through curriculum, materials, classroom interaction, assessment, and teacher mediation.

Table 1 Roles of Language Learning in Multicultural Education

Role	Pedagogical Focus	Expected Contribution
Cultural representation	Texts, images, stories, names, examples, and topics represent diverse communities.	Students encounter identities beyond dominant or stereotyped representations.
Intercultural awareness	Students compare, interpret, and reflect on cultural meanings and perspectives.	Students develop empathy, perspective-taking, and interpretive skills.
Dialogic interaction	Classroom talk allows respectful exchange of different views and experiences.	Students practice listening, negotiation, and disagreement without hostility.
Inclusive participation	Tasks provide access, voice, and agency for students from different backgrounds.	Students experience belonging and equitable participation.
Critical tolerance	Students question stereotypes, prejudice, exclusion, and unequal representation.	Tolerance becomes active recognition rather than passive acceptance.

Source: Synthesized from reviewed literature.

The first role is cultural representation. Language materials shape what students see as normal, valuable, and speakable. If textbooks and

classroom texts represent only dominant cultures, urban middle-class experiences, or native-speaker norms, students may learn that some identities matter more than others. Multicultural language learning requires materials that include local cultures, national diversity, international perspectives, minority voices, multilingual practices, and everyday experiences of diverse learners. Representation should not be reduced to cultural decoration; it should open opportunities for interpretation and dialogue.

The second role is intercultural awareness. Students need to learn that cultural meanings are not fixed and that people within the same culture may think and act differently. Intercultural awareness can be developed through comparing greetings, politeness strategies, family narratives, school routines, stories, proverbs, environmental practices, and social issues. However, comparison should not reinforce stereotypes. Teachers need to guide students to ask why differences exist, how meanings are shaped by context, and how respectful communication can occur despite different assumptions.

The third role is dialogic interaction. Tolerance and inclusion are not learned only by reading moral statements. They are practiced through classroom interaction. Language classrooms can provide structured opportunities for students to listen to different opinions, ask questions, disagree respectfully, summarize others' perspectives, and collaborate across differences. Speaking tasks, group discussion, role-play, storytelling, dialogue journals, and project-based learning can become multicultural practices when they are guided by norms of respect and equal participation.

The fourth role is inclusive participation. A multicultural language classroom should ensure that all learners can participate meaningfully. Inclusion requires attention to students' linguistic repertoire, confidence, proficiency level, cultural identity, learning needs, and classroom status. Translanguaging, multimodal response, small-group roles, differentiated tasks, peer support, and flexible assessment can help students participate even when they have different language abilities. Inclusion also requires teachers to notice whose voices are frequently heard and whose voices are silent.

The fifth role is critical tolerance. Multicultural education should avoid turning tolerance into a simple slogan. Students should learn to identify stereotypes, discriminatory language, exclusionary jokes, unequal representation, and biased narratives. Critical literacy activities can help learners analyze how texts represent gender, ethnicity, religion, social class, disability, and nationality. In this sense,

language learning can promote tolerance by developing students' ability to use language ethically and challenge harmful discourse.

Table 2 Pedagogical Strategies for Promoting Tolerance and Inclusion through Language Learning

Strategy	Classroom Practice	Multicultural Value
Culturally responsive materials	Use stories, dialogues, and reading texts from diverse local and global communities.	Recognition of identity and diversity
Perspective-taking tasks	Ask students to rewrite stories from another character or community viewpoint.	Empathy and interpretive flexibility
Dialogic discussion norms	Teach sentence starters for respectful agreement, disagreement, and clarification.	Tolerance in communication
Critical text analysis	Analyze stereotypes, missing voices, and unequal representation in texts or media.	Critical awareness and justice
Translanguaging support	Allow strategic use of students' languages for brainstorming, peer explanation, and cultural terms.	Linguistic inclusion
Collaborative projects	Design multilingual posters, community interviews, intercultural storybooks, or tolerance campaigns.	Participation and shared responsibility
Reflective assessment	Use learning journals, self-assessment, and peer reflection on inclusive communication.	Metacognition and ethical language use

Source: Synthesized from reviewed literature.

The reviewed literature suggests that culturally responsive materials are central to multicultural language learning. Students engage more meaningfully when classroom materials connect with their identities, communities, and lived experiences. At the same time, materials should expose students to unfamiliar perspectives so that learning does not become culturally closed. The strongest materials combine familiarity and difference: they validate students' backgrounds while inviting them to understand others.

Perspective-taking tasks are particularly useful because they require students to interpret the experience of another person or community. In language classrooms, perspective-taking can be integrated into reading response, narrative writing, role-play, debate, interview projects, and reflective journals. These tasks develop both language skills and intercultural sensitivity. Students learn linguistic forms for describing feelings, explaining reasons, asking respectful questions, and acknowledging difference.

Critical text analysis helps students understand that language can include or exclude. For example, students may analyze how a textbook

describes a cultural group, how an advertisement uses stereotypes, how a news headline frames migrants, or how a story represents gender roles. Such tasks move multicultural education beyond celebration of diversity toward critical examination of representation and power. This is necessary because inclusion requires not only positive attitudes but also awareness of structural and discursive exclusion.

Translanguaging and multilingual support also contribute to inclusion. In multilingual classrooms, students' home languages should not be treated as obstacles to language learning. They can be used strategically for brainstorming, comparing expressions, explaining cultural meanings, and supporting peer learning. Such practices affirm students' linguistic identities and show that language learning does not require rejecting one's existing language resources.

Reflective assessment is needed because tolerance and inclusion are not easily measured through conventional grammar tests. Teachers can use reflective journals, dialogue logs, peer feedback, group process evaluation, intercultural portfolios, and self-assessment checklists. These instruments allow students to evaluate how they communicate, whether they listen respectfully, whether they include peers, and how their views change after interacting with different perspectives.

Table 3 Challenges and Responses in Multicultural Language Learning

Challenge	Risk	Pedagogical Response
Superficial culture teaching	Culture becomes food, festivals, clothing, and tourist facts only.	Connect cultural products with practices, perspectives, histories, and values.
Stereotype reinforcement	Comparison tasks produce simplistic claims about groups.	Teach intra-cultural diversity, context, and anti-stereotype questioning.
Unequal participation	Confident students dominate while others remain silent.	Use structured roles, wait time, small groups, and multimodal responses.
Teacher uncertainty	Teachers avoid sensitive issues to prevent conflict.	Use clear discussion protocols and age-appropriate critical questions.
Assessment mismatch	Tolerance and inclusion are not reflected in evaluation.	Use reflection, portfolio, peer review, and intercultural performance tasks.

Source: Synthesized from reviewed literature.

The synthesis also revealed several implementation challenges. Teachers may avoid multicultural topics because they fear conflict, lack training, or feel uncertain about discussing identity, religion, ethnicity, social class, or inequality. This avoidance may keep classrooms superficially harmonious but does not help students learn how to communicate across real differences. Teachers need professional development in facilitating sensitive dialogue, selecting

inclusive materials, and designing critical but respectful language tasks.

Another challenge is the possibility of reinforcing stereotypes. Cultural comparison can unintentionally produce statements such as one culture is polite while another is direct, or one community is traditional while another is modern. Teachers should guide students to recognize diversity within groups, avoid overgeneralization, and examine how context shapes behavior. This makes multicultural learning more accurate and ethical.

Assessment is also a challenge. Standardized language assessment often measures vocabulary, grammar, reading comprehension, and writing mechanics, but it rarely measures intercultural understanding, respectful communication, or inclusive participation. As a result, teachers may treat multicultural education as supplementary. To address this, multicultural objectives should be integrated into performance tasks, speaking rubrics, writing prompts, portfolios, and reflective journals.

2. Discussion

The findings indicate that language learning is a strategic site for multicultural education because language mediates identity, relationship, meaning, and participation. When students read stories from diverse communities, discuss social issues, compare cultural meanings, and collaborate with peers, they are not only practicing language forms. They are also learning how to recognize difference, listen respectfully, and express disagreement without exclusion. This supports the argument that multicultural education must be embedded in everyday pedagogy rather than limited to special celebrations or commemorative events.

The first major implication is that multicultural language learning requires an explicit shift from culture-as-content to culture-as-interaction. Culture-as-content presents culture as information to be memorized. Culture-as-interaction presents culture as meaning that is interpreted, negotiated, and reflected upon. In language classrooms, this shift can be operationalized through tasks that ask students to interpret motives, compare perspectives, ask culturally sensitive questions, and produce inclusive messages. This aligns with intercultural communicative competence, which emphasizes attitudes, interpretation, discovery, interaction, and critical cultural awareness.

The second implication is that tolerance must be taught as active communication. Students should learn language resources for inclusive interaction, such as asking clarification, expressing disagreement politely, acknowledging another perspective, apologizing

for misunderstanding, and inviting quieter peers to contribute. These communicative routines transform tolerance from an abstract value into observable classroom practice. A student who can say, I understand your point, but I see it differently because..., is practicing both language competence and democratic interaction.

The fourth implication is the need for critical literacy. Without critical literacy, multicultural language learning may become celebratory but shallow. Students may learn that diversity is beautiful but not learn how discrimination operates through language and representation. Critical literacy tasks can ask students to identify who is represented, who is missing, what assumptions are made, and how language can create respect or exclusion. Such tasks are suitable for reading, writing, speaking, and media analysis.

The fifth implication is teacher mediation. Multicultural education through language learning cannot rely on textbooks alone. Teachers decide which examples to emphasize, whose voices to invite, how to respond to biased statements, and how to manage disagreement. Teachers therefore need intercultural awareness, culturally responsive pedagogy, and facilitation skills. They also need to reflect on their own assumptions because teachers' beliefs about language, culture, and identity shape classroom practice.

The review also suggests that multicultural language learning should be developmentally appropriate. Younger learners may begin with stories, songs, pictures, classroom routines, and simple perspective-taking. Older learners can analyze media, debate social issues, write reflective essays, conduct community interviews, and design intercultural projects. The complexity of topics and tasks should match students' language proficiency, emotional maturity, and classroom context.

Comparison with Previous Studies

The textbook research documents how thoroughly this pattern is established. Shin, Eslami, and Chen (2011) analysed widely used international English coursebooks and found culture presented overwhelmingly as information about inner-circle countries, Yuen (2011) reported a similar imbalance in the representation of foreign cultures, and Weninger and Kiss (2013) showed through semiotic analysis that cultural material is typically offered as fact to be absorbed rather than as text to be interpreted. Setyono and Widodo (2019) examined an Indonesian ministry-endorsed EFL textbook and found multicultural values present but unevenly, with some groups visible mainly as objects of description. Levina, Lukmanova, Romanovskaya,

and Rakhmatullina (2016) describe the alternative, reporting classroom work in which tolerance was taught through structured discussion of the language material itself rather than through additional moral instruction.

Two further concepts explain why inclusion cannot be reduced to participation. Norton and Toohey (2011) show that language learning is bound up with identity and with the social relations that determine who is granted the right to speak, so a learner's silence may reflect positioning rather than proficiency. Li (2018) develops translanguaging as a practical theory of language, arguing that multilingual speakers draw on a single integrated repertoire rather than on separate languages, which supplies the rationale for allowing students to use their full linguistic resources in an English classroom. Taken together, these positions reframe inclusion as a question of whose repertoire and whose identity the classroom treats as legitimate.

Implications for Classroom Practice

Three implications follow for language teachers. First, intercultural objectives should be stated alongside language objectives in the lesson plan, because the reviewed evidence shows that what is not planned is not taught: culture left implicit becomes topic content rather than an object of inquiry. Second, the task rather than the text carries the learning. A reading passage about another community followed by comprehension questions asks students to absorb information, whereas one followed by perspective-taking or comparison asks them to interpret, and the reviewed implementations reporting attitude change used the latter. Third, teachers should treat their own mediation as the decisive variable, since the same material produces different outcomes depending on whether disagreement is opened for discussion or closed with a stated conclusion.

Inclusion requires the same deliberateness. The reviewed evidence indicates that permitting students to draw on their full linguistic repertoire raises participation among those least likely to speak, and that recognising home languages in classroom routines costs little while signalling whose knowledge counts. Assessment should follow: if tolerance and inclusion are stated as objectives but only grammatical accuracy is graded, students will read the grading as the real curriculum.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Four limitations qualify this synthesis. It is a narrative review and computes no effect sizes. Much of the underlying evidence is conceptual or descriptive, and the studies that do measure attitude

change rely on self-report instruments whose relationship to classroom behaviour is not established. The corpus is weighted towards European and North American settings, where the composition of diversity and the legal framing of inclusion differ from those in Indonesia. And the textbook analyses report representation rather than what students make of it. Future research could examine how learners in multilingual Indonesian classrooms interpret culturally loaded material, test whether perspective-taking tasks change behaviour as well as stated attitude, and develop assessment approaches that capture intercultural reasoning without attempting to score tolerance itself.

D. Conclusion

This article examined multicultural education through language learning as a means of promoting tolerance and inclusion in EFL classrooms. The structured narrative review showed that language learning can contribute to multicultural education through five interrelated roles: cultural representation, intercultural awareness, dialogic interaction, inclusive participation, and critical tolerance. The synthesis indicates that tolerance and inclusion are strengthened when language materials represent diverse identities, classroom tasks invite perspective-taking, interaction is structured dialogically, students' linguistic resources are valued, and assessment includes reflective and intercultural dimensions. The article also shows that multicultural language learning requires more than inserting cultural facts into lessons. It requires explicit intercultural objectives, culturally responsive materials, critical literacy, inclusive classroom routines, and teacher mediation. The study concludes that language classrooms can become powerful spaces for developing tolerance and inclusion when students are guided to use language not only accurately but also ethically, respectfully, and critically. Future empirical studies should examine classroom-based interventions, student attitude changes, teacher facilitation practices, and the long-term impact of multicultural language learning on inclusive school culture.

Declaration of AI-Assisted Technologies

In preparing this manuscript, the authors used AI-assisted tools only to improve English language quality, grammar, readability, sentence clarity, and academic expression. The AI tools were not used to generate research data, conduct data analysis, produce findings, or draw conclusions. All conceptual arguments, data interpretation, methodological decisions, and scholarly conclusions remain the full responsibility of the authors. The authors carefully reviewed, edited,

and verified all AI-assisted outputs to ensure the accuracy, integrity, and originality of the final manuscript.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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