

Arabic Syntactic Interference on EFL Writing: An Analysis of First Year EFL Students' Written Productions at Skikda University, Algeria

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Abstract:

This study investigates the impact Arabic syntactic structures interference on learning English as Foreign Language. It seeks to examine the extent to which the native Arabic system (L¹) is relied on by Algerian students as a learning strategy in learning English as a foreign language (L²). Therefore, a descriptive analytical method is undertaken through a corpus analysis of first year EFL students' assignments on grammar and writing at Skikda University. The analysis of assignments reveals that the majority of students commit syntactic errors in their written productions which are specifically come from the interference of Arabic syntactic structures on English at different levels such as word choice, word order and inflection. A possible interpretation could be attributed to students' learning strategies. Therefore, it is recommended that EFL teachers would employ strategies to help learners avoid the interference of L¹ on L².

Key Words: Algerian context, EFL students, L¹ interference, syntax, writing skill

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١. Introduction

The most dramatic development in the field of English language teaching has been related to the shift of its primary function from being mainly the native language of UK and USA nations to being mainly a global means of communication (Ur, ٢٠١٢). This implies that learning English as a foreign language (EFL) has expanded worldwide as a communicative need, and becomes the primary target language of many communities and Algeria is no exception. Yet, the complexity of English language system which appears in different aspects such as phonology, morphology and syntax remains a serious challenge for the nonnative speakers of this global language.

Algerian EFL learners find learning English a daunting task for many communicative and linguistic reasons. Most importantly, they study English as the second foreign language at a late grade (٧th grade) in comparison to French which starts in the primary school (٢nd grade) or Arabic (mother tongue). Therefore, to form correct syntactic structures in the target language, they lean to rely on the syntactic structure of their first language (Arabic) or their first foreign language (French) in constructing the target one (English). Ellis (١٩٩٤, p.١٥) points “the acquisition of an L٢ feature may be considered to have taken place either when it is used for the first time or when it can be used as a similarity to L١”. The objective of SLA is describing the learners’ ability to use language for communicative purposes and features could be acquired through the application of language and focus on its correct use.

Many university teachers claim that EFL learners do encounter problems while learning English language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing). Yet, their codified weaknesses are mostly noticed in the writing skill. The latter has been considered as the most complex skill linguistically (because a new syntactic system is used) and cognitively (because it is a representation of ones thinking). At Skikda university, first year EFL students have been noticed to commit this kind of errors, while writing in English. They have the habit of think in Arabic and write in English whenever they are asked to write in English. They tend to modeling their mother tongue system (Arabic syntactic rules), and apply it the same way in English language syntactic structure writing. Although EFL learners have been learning English language for many years before joining university, this integration is seen as an obstacle to learners’ foreign language development. Hence, their writing skill will be improved.

Therefore, this study significantly focuses on identifying the nature of errors could be committed by first year EFL students, their types. In addition, suggesting teaching and learning strategies to primarily consider these errors to reduce learners’ dependency on Arabic language syntactic structure is recommended.

The current study aims to answer the following two questions:

- a. To what extent Algerian learners rely on Arabic syntactic structure in their EFL writing?

- b.** What are the effects of learners' dependency on Arabic syntactic structure in EFL writing?

Based on the above quests, the present research work seeks to test the following hypothesis: Since there are similarities and differences between Arabic and English syntactic structures, EFL learners are likely to integrate L¹ on L² learning.

٢. Research Methodology and Data Collection Tools

This study follows a descriptive quantitative analytical approach. It is conducted through an analysis of students' written productions (Corpus analysis). The sample of ٣٠ first year students of English language at Skikda University has been randomly selected. They have been given two tasks: one focuses on grammar points. This task was based on forming syntagmatically correct sentences in English. Concerning the other one, it was addressed to paragraph free writing. they write about a suggested topic, and their productions were analyzed based on the features of English syntactic rules. These tasks were answered by students during the session of writing and grammar with the help of their teachers.

٣. Literature Review

٣.١. EFL Writing Skill

In second language learning, writing is challenging for EFL learners. "Becoming a writer is a complex process. It is therefore encouraging to realize that a great deal about writing has been learned from studying how native speakers of English acquire skill in writing" (Kroll, ١٩٩٠, p. ١). In other words, writing is not an easy task, but it is one of the indispensable skills that second language learners need to develop while they are writing different forms of productions (sentences, paragraphs essays) of different types. Hyland (٢٠٠٣) considers learning how to write in second language as one of the most challenging aspects of second language learning despite all the difficulties that encounter them while generating ideas and making them coherent and cohesive.

٣.٢. First Language Interference in EFL Writing

Researchers have found that EFL learners do face difficulties to jump out the complexity of second language writing. They do not know how to apply the target language rules correctly. They usually integrate the rules of their first language system (L¹) in second language (L²) writing. This integration is known as interference, Ur (١٩٩٢, p. ٨٨) states, "Second language learners are already fluent in one language. So, unless they are aware of the differences, they may sometimes unconsciously apply a usage which is not appropriate for second language (interference)". Ellis (١٩٩٤) L¹ interference in L² as the influence that the learner's L¹ exerts over the acquisition of L²...the learner's L¹ is one of the sources of errors in learner language. This influence could be positive as it could be negative. The latter may make learning problems for many L² learners who rely on their first language as a source to L² learning. Based on their studies conducted on Indian learners, when they start to write in English, Maniam and Keseven (٢٠١٦) have shown that they first think about their ideas from the perspective of their mother tongue. Thus, grammatical and syntactic errors are heavily recognized.

٣.٣. Forms of Syntactic Errors in EFL Writing

EFL learners tend in particular to integrate the syntactic structure of their first language in learning the syntactic structure of English in terms of syntagmatic and paradigmatic relationships; Mano (٢٠١٦, p.٥٨) argues “the grammatical structure of the native language tends to be transferred to the foreign language. Students tend to transfer the sentence forms, modification devices, the number, the gender and case patterns of native language”. The grammatical rules of learners’ first language are tended to be transferred in English language for instance learners may make transfer in using tense, plural, word order, prepositions, articles and other forms of language.

Many studies are carried out to investigate the interference of L¹ on L² writing. Hussain (٢٠٢٣) has made a study about the interference of the first language on EFL students. In his study, he compared between four languages, Vietnamese, Canadian, Spanish and Italian. He found that students have used L¹ structure to produce L² responses and to produce coherent and cohesive texts. His analysis to learner’s writing showed the extent to which their L² writings are affected by L¹. Mano (٢٠١٦) has arrived at specific results from a study conducted on secondary school students. It has been indicated that students integrate their first language in learning EFL orthography and pronunciation at Batu secondary school. Therefore, EFL learners, generally, base their writing primarily on integrating one language which they are considered it as a knowledgeable source. They usually rely on their mother tongue especially in using its syntactic structure and apply it in foreign language writing (Hussain, et al. ٢٠١٥)

٤. Data Analysis and Interpretation of Results

٤.١. Results of Students’ Sentence Construction Assignment

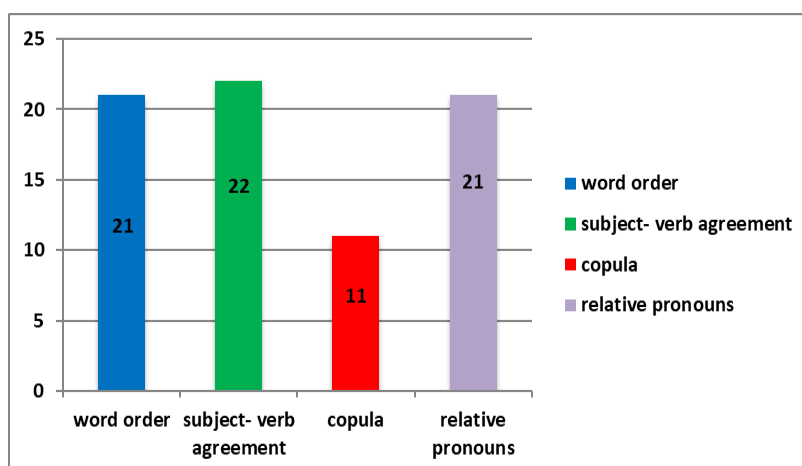
The results obtained from the analysis of both tasks given to students have been presented and described based on the types that have been frequently identified in the productions. The following tables and figures provide detailed illustrations of the results with their frequencies and percentages.

Table ٠١.

Types of Grammatical Errors in Sentence Construction

Type of Error	Frequency
Word Order	21
The Omission Of Copula	11
Subject- Verb Agreement	22
Relative Pronouns	21

Figure ٠١.

Types of Grammatical Errors in Sentence Construction

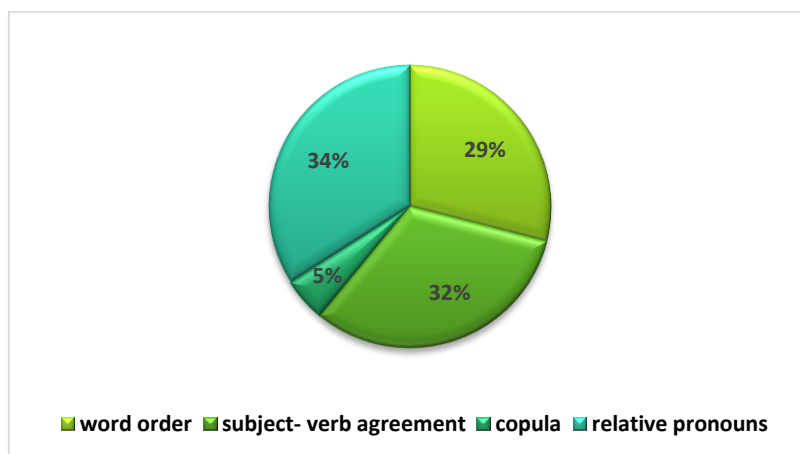
The table and figure above represent the types of errors that have been detected in the assignment of grammatical rules which was composed of two tasks. As it is shown in the results, the majorities of students do correct errors and failed to detect where the error is in the first task. The same thing in the second task most of them failed to reorder words by following English syntagmatic rules. Based on their answers, errors are classified as follows: word order errors, subject-verb agreement, the use of copula, and the use of relative pronouns. For word order there are ٢١ out of ٢٣ students who could not reorder words into well-structured sentences. For subject-verb agreement ٢٢ of students failed to make agreement between subject and a verb especially in the case of using third person 's' and to make agreement between demonstrative pronouns with plural and singular nouns like the error given to them 'this toys', no one could correct it. Concerning the use of copula, the majority of students failed in the use of copula in the sentence given to them to correct 'she always smiling'. The last type of errors identified is in the use of relative pronouns. ٢١ of students could not correct the relative pronouns' errors.

Table ٠٢.

Frequency of Students' Grammatical Errors

Types of grammar errors	Percentage %
Word order	29%
Subject –verb agreement	32%
Copula Omission	5%
Relative pronouns	34%
Total	100%

Figure ٠٢.

Frequency of Students' Grammatical Errors

Based on the data presented in Table ٠٢ and Figure ٠٢, the number of students' grammatical errors which they could not reach the correct form of it has been transformed into their equivalent percentages. It is obvious that the high percent ٣٤% is found in the use of relative pronouns, it is followed by subject –verb agreement ٣٢%, ٢٩% of errors is given to word order, and the last percent is ٥% about the use of copula. According to these information students lack knowledge about the most grammar rules of English language.

٤.٢. Results of Students' Paragraph Writing Assignment

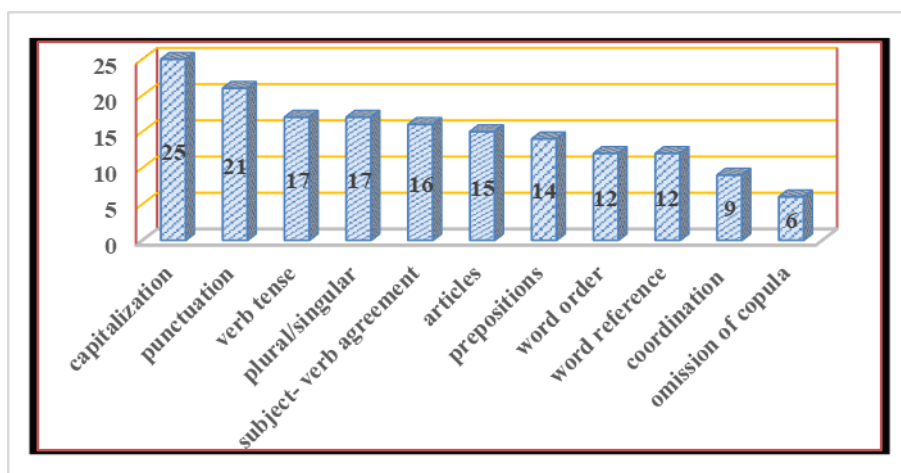
In the second assignment, students were asked to write a paragraph about a given topic of their suggestions. Students' productions have been collected and analysed based on the syntactic errors committed. The latter have been identified and classified according to their types. Table ٠٣ and Figure ٠٣ bellow shows various types of syntactic structures errors appeared in the students' productions.

Table ٠٣.

English Syntactic Structure Errors in Paragraph Writing

Type of Error	number of Students who committed the error
Capitalization	25
Punctuation	21
Verb tense	17
Plural/Singular	17
Subject-verb agreement	16
Articles	15
Prepositions	14
Word order	12
Word reference	12
Coordination	9
Omission of copula	6

Figure ٠٣.

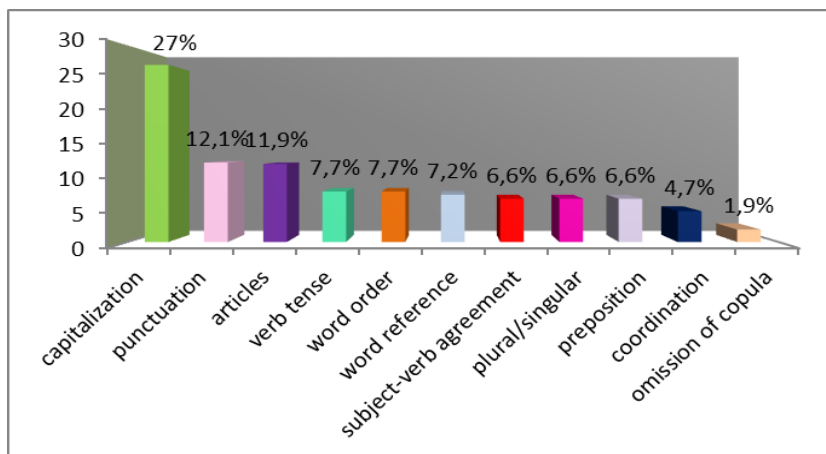
English Syntactic Structure Errors in Paragraph Writing

According to the data shown above, the syntactic errors are significantly related to capitalization, punctuation, verb tense, plural/Singular, subject verb agreement, articles, prepositions, word order, word reference, coordination, and omission of copula. As it is presented, the highest numbers of students ٢٥ commit capitalization errors. In addition, ٢١ out of ٢٨ paragraph punctuation errors occur. Furthermore, verb tense and plural/ singular errors are noticeable with ١٧ students. Concerning subject- verb agreement, ١٦ students commit the error. Another type of errors is the use of articles where it is found in ١٥ paragraphs. Out of these grammatical errors, the misuse of prepositions is another type of errors found in ١٤ paragraphs. Word reference and word order are one of the difficulties that occur in ١٢ paragraphs. In

the last two errors, the misuse of coordination is observed in ٩ paragraphs while in ٦ paragraphs the omission of copula occurs.

Figure ٠٤.

Frequency of Students' Syntactic Structure Errors in Paragraph Writing



Results of Figure ٠٤ revealed that the total frequency of students' syntactic structure errors. First, capitalization errors are repeated ٢٨ times in students' paragraphs with a highest percentage ٢٧%. However, punctuation is used ١٢ times with ١١, ١%. The other error after punctuation is the misuse of articles where they are ١٢ frequently used with ١١%. Moreover, ٧ errors are the frequency of both verb tense and word order with ٧, ٧%. Concerning word reference is repeated ٧ times in students' paragraphs with ٧, ٧%. Furthermore, subject-verb agreement, plural/singular, and the misuse of prepositions each one of them is ٦ times frequented with a percentage of ٦, ٦%. Finally, coordination is misused ٤ times with ٤, ٧%, while copula is omitted ١ times with ١, ١%.

Table ٥.

Syntactic Structure Errors' Illustrations and their correct forms

Type of error	Illustrations from students assignments	The correct form
Subject- verb agreement	- so one have to learn it... -...most people over the world use English in their communications and deals with people ...	- ...so one has to learn it... -...most people over the world use English in their communications and deal with people...
Word order	-...person cultured... - ...it should student learning English, because language of the world -English learning became very important	- ...cultivated person... -... students should learn English, because it is the language of the world -Learning English becomes very important
Word reference	- It is very important to learn English..., because most people over the world use English -Most people over the world use English in their communications and deals with people...	-It is very important to learn English..., because most people over the world use it. -Most people over the world use English in their communication and deal with others...
Plural/Singular	-... we get more informations... -dfferentes parts -...persons... -This days	- ...we get more information -different parts -...people... -These days
Articles	-The English language is very important -This helped the language the share it in the other countries.	-English language is Important -This helped to share language in the other countries
Coordination	-...because you know and you could speak and also it is the mother tongue -...to understand cultures and make relations between countries and until persons to get a way.	-...because you know and you could speak it. Also it is ... -...to understand cultures, make relations between countries, and even people
Preposition	-...with many persons of different nationalities -English is also useful in job opportunities	-...with many people from different nationalities -Also English is useful for job opportunities
Punctuation	-It is good to learn English because it is an international language.	- It is good to learn English, because it is an international language.
Capitalization	-...french... -arabic language -...english... -Finally, Learning English -...to learn English and Know more about This language	-...French... -Arabic language -...English... -Finally, learning English -...to learn English and know more about this language
Verb tense	-English is the most uses language in the world -...or what they have listening...	-English is the most used language in the world - ...or what they are listening...

After the significant analysis of students' grammar tasks of and written production assignments, the next step is to interpret the findings with the focus on the main reasons behind students' errors in the tasks. First, the analysis of grammar tasks revealed that that first-year students still lack knowledge about English grammar rules. This result appears in the tasks evaluation since the majority of students from ١١ to ٢٢ papers find difficulties in answering the activities correctly. Although, they have studied grammar rules not just in their university curriculum but even in the pre university levels. Four main types of errors have been detected, which

are subject- verb agreement, word order, the omission of copula, and the misuse of relative pronouns.

As it is shown in the data presentation, ٢١ of students fail to reorder words and form well-structured sentences. For instance, they write “Alex sang loudly the song loudly”, “you have done your homework yet?”. Out of these sentences it is obvious that students did not follow the order of English sentence. For the sentence “Alex sang loudly the song”, in this case student misuse in the order of the adverb and did not respect their position in sentences, because English adverbs appear to provide an explanation how something is done. Hence, students do rely on Arabic word order “الكيس غنى بصوت عال الأغنية”. For the sentence “you have done your homework yet?” the error in this case is known as disorder error it occurs because of the incomplete application of English question form rules.

Concerning the second type of errors “subject-verb agreement” ٢٢ students fail to make an agreement between the elements of English sentence. For instance, ‘the boy who have just arrived at the airport’, ‘my mother have made a delicious chocolate cake’, ‘Jack always have a breakfast in the kitchen’. In these sentences, students could not make agreement between the subject and the verb and mainly this agreement is in the third personal pronoun ‘it’, they over-generalize the Arabic rules since Arabic language does not have such cases; which makes difficulties for students to apply English rules.

In addition, there is a strong tendency of students’ misuse of relative pronouns ٢١ students fail to make the correct form of relative pronouns, for instance they write ‘he is Peter, the boy which have just arrived to the airport’, ‘the man who his father is professor, forgot his umbrella’, ‘I talked to the girl which her car had broken in front of the shop’. Out of these examples it is observed that students combine between a particular relative pronoun and possessive pronouns. They use ‘which her’ or ‘who his’ instead of ‘whose’, they usually find difficulties in their use since the Arabic relative pronouns are different from the English ones. In Arabic relative pronouns are divided according to gender and number and are not with complicated rules. The last error found in the task, which is the omission of copula ١١ students do commit it since only one sentence is given to them ‘she always smiling’. The reason behind it is that students’ English knowledge is still limited to Arabic which does not have the same case of English.

Second, students’ paragraphs expose significant syntactic errors that most students committed, and which can be traced back to the Arabic system interference expressing an idea in English the same way in Arabic. The analysis of students’ assignments shows that first year EFL students at Skikda University did not respect English syntactic structure. It appears clearly in the different grammatical errors committed. These errors are significantly related to capitalization, punctuation, verb tense, plural/ singular, subject- verb agreement, articles, prepositions, word order, word reference, coordination, and the misuse of copula. Throughout the analysis it appears that the main reason behind their inappropriate English writing is the interference of Arabic system.

Concerning capitalization, EFL students at Skikda University from the observation of their writing do not use capitalization at the beginning of a sentence and even for words like 'English' the majority write it 'english'. Students find difficulty to follow capitalization, because capitalization does not exist in Arabic structure. Furthermore, the use of punctuation is another problem that EFL students face. There students who did not use punctuation throughout the whole paragraph, they write as it as it is considered as one sentence since they do not have enough knowledge about punctuations' rules.

Considering coordination, they use 'and' instead of comma ',', when listing words which is the case of Arabic structure. In Arabic sentence the connective 'و', since it is similar to 'and', then EFL students thought that they have the same rules for instance, 'in their use to understand cultures and make relations between countries and until persons' this sentence confirms that students are translating from Arabic expression لفهم الثقافات وعمل علاقات وحتى مع الأشخاص. In addition, it is observed that they use 'and also' repeatedly which is similar to the Arabic use 'و أيضا'. Another proof about Arabic interference is in the use of articles. English there are two kinds of articles definite 'the' and indefinite articles 'a, an', while in Arabic there is only one definite article 'أل التعريف' EFL students use it as similar to the article the 'the' for instance they write 'the English' as in الانجليزية, 'because the English now is the first language in the world' لان الانجليزية الآن هي اللغة الأولى في العالم.

Another instance of Arabic interference appears in word order structure, for instance EFL students write 'should student learning English because it is language of the world and never ever vanish' يجب على الطالب تعلم الانجليزية لأنها لا ولن تنقرض. In this sentence students did not follow fixed English word order (SVO), but instead they follow the Arabic one. Another example 'nowadays, it is very important to learn English' في أيامنا هذه من المهم تعلم الانجليزية instead of learning English is very important (S+ V + Adj); 'a person cultured' that is equivalent to Arabic إنسان متقف. Moreover, the misuse of preposition is a sign where they expressed in Arabic meaning for instance, English is useful in every part in the world (في العالم), translate to English (مترجمة إلى الانجليزية) which is normally, translated into English Throughout their assignments they use some expressions translated from Arabic to English, 'it has a big importance' لها أهمية كبيرة, they favorite languages especially English, يفضلون اللغات وخاصة الإنجليزية.

٤.٣. Discussion

Through the analysis of the data obtained, it reveals that although First year EFL learners are exposed to learning English language for many years, students at Skikda university still commit syntactic structure errors in writing because of the interference of Arabic syntactic structure rules. They translate Arabic sentence structure as it is and write it with English words without respecting the accurate English full structure. The frequency of errors is found in the use of subject- verb agreement, word order, the use of articles, and punctuation. The results have described clearly learners' dependency on Arabic language syntactic structure. EFL learners were expected to focus on applying the rules of each language separately without any kind of integration. This would help them respecting the syntactic

structure of English language writing. Hence, their writing will be improved, and they will achieve their learning goals.

٥. Conclusion

The study in hand is concerned with the examination of first year EFL student's syntactic interference of L¹ on L² at Skikda University. The main aim of the analysis of their grammatical and written tasks is to highlight to what extent they rely on their Arabic syntactic structure rules to shape the English ones. Moreover, they form a sentence in Arabic and translate it into English without making efforts in applying the accurate English syntactic rules. Thus, they commit errors at different levels (capitalization, punctuation, word order, subject-verb agreement, prepositions, coordination, singular/plural form, and different levels).

To close with, overcoming the problem of interference is the responsibility of both teachers and students, they should follow some strategies. Students may not have enough knowledge about English syntactic rules, it is the role of teachers not only to teach them English syntactic rules but also to help them in applying these rules in authentic situations. In addition, they should motivate students and encourage them to practice their language knowledge. Furthermore, teachers should try and show the differences between the systems of the two languages. Moreover, students have to avoid thinking and translating in Arabic whenever they are asked to write a piece of writing.

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