

The first language advantage: working with bilingual research assistants

AMES Vision

Full participation for all in a cohesive and diverse society

Acknowledgements

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Introduction

AMES has been conducting research with migrants who have low levels of English since 2008.¹ Our practice in the Research and Policy Unit has been to employ AMES staff fluent in the languages of research participants to make this possible. This paper discusses our experience of working with bilingual research assistants in a 2012 project on employment. In this project we interviewed just over 100 migrants about their experiences of and aspirations for work in Australia. The research assistants working on the project were themselves migrants and spoke the languages we needed to communicate with participants. In addition to this they came from similar cultural backgrounds to the participants. As AMES staff they brought a thorough understanding of the diverse settlement and employment experiences of migrants. These attributes enabled the research assistants to develop very good rapport with the participants and as a consequence we were able to gain valuable information about the varied employment situations of this group of recently arrived migrants. The paper discusses the benefits and some of the challenges of our approach.

Background

AMES has worked with migrants in Victoria, Australia, for more than 60 years. It is one of the largest providers of services for people who are newly arrived, delivering initial settlement, English language, training and employment services.² AMES also works to influence policy in areas relevant to the settlement of migrants.

Most people using AMES services have low levels of English. AMES employs people from the same cultural and linguistic backgrounds as clients throughout the organisation. Staff with diverse backgrounds work in service delivery, contribute to AMES research and policy work and are involved in regular community consultations. Around 55 languages are spoken within the current AMES staff group.

In this paper we focus on the use of bilingual research assistants in a Longitudinal Study conducted by the AMES Research and Policy Unit.³ This study took place between 2008 and 2012 and was based on a series of individual interviews with people who had arrived in Australia recently and were learning English. The paper specifically considers our experiences of employing research assistants during the fourth phase of the research conducted in 2012.

This paper has been written for two reasons. First, our experiences may be of interest to others conducting research with people who have low levels of English. Second, given that we will continue

¹ In this paper we use the term 'migrants' as an inclusive term for all people who have migrated to Australia irrespective of whether they have come through the Skilled, Family or Humanitarian streams of the immigration program.

² In 2013 AMES employed 1080 people and provided services to approximately 45,000 people (AMES 2013).

³ For the sake of brevity we refer to staff fluent in languages other than English as 'bilingual.' In fact many of our staff are multilingual and some of the research assistants employed in this project used more than one language other than English to conduct the research.

to employ bilingual research assistants in future research, the paper provides an opportunity to evaluate and strengthen our approach.

In their detailed text on interviewing, Kvale and Brinkmann discuss the use of this method for collecting qualitative data. They emphasise the importance of examining in some detail what takes place during interview exchanges:

Valid knowledge claims are established in a discourse through which the results of a study come to be viewed as sufficiently trustworthy for other investigators to rely upon in their own work. When conversation is the ultimate context within which knowledge is to be understood (...), the nature of the discourse becomes essential. (Kvale & Brinkmann 2008, p. 254)

It is the nature of the conversations in our own research that we consider here.

The title of this paper is taken from an interview with a research assistant about her work on the Longitudinal Study. This research assistant has worked with us on a number of research projects, interviewing people both in English and in her first language, Cantonese. Comparing her experiences of working in each language she said, *“I have found that using the first language has the advantage.”* (Interview with Research Assistant 1)

The AMES Longitudinal Study

The Longitudinal Study focussed on the experiences of recent migrants who were studying English at AMES. The objectives of the study were to investigate the impact of the Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP) on settlement and to understand the early vocational and employment pathways of this group of migrants.

Data collection for the research took place through a series of individual interviews with participants. The study was conducted in the languages most commonly spoken by AMEP learners at the time. These were Arabic, Burmese, Cantonese, Chin, Dari, Hazaragi, Karen, Mandarin, Tamil and Vietnamese.⁴ Over the course of the study we employed 18 bilingual research assistants to conduct interviews in first language.

The participants of the Longitudinal Study were diverse in terms of educational and employment backgrounds. They included people who had little literacy in their first language and had never worked formally (for example, young adults who had spent most of their lives in refugee camps), people who had worked in a range of non-professionals roles overseas (for example in hospitality, construction, transport) and people who had tertiary degrees and significant specialty in their fields (for example engineering, IT, finance).

⁴ A number of people from other language backgrounds with higher levels of English were included in this study and interviewed in English.

By 2012 Longitudinal Study participants had been in Australia for approximately four years. At this point we were particularly interested in their most recent experiences of employment and their aspirations for work in the future. These themes became the focus of the fourth wave of the Longitudinal Study, known as the *Finding Satisfying Work* project.⁵

Finding Satisfying Work

The *Finding Satisfying Work* project was overseen by two groups. The Advisory Group was comprised of people working in research relating to migration. These included staff from the Department of Immigration and Citizenship, the Refugee Council of Australia, the University of Melbourne and VicHealth. The role of the Advisory Group was to provide advice on the research theme, design and data analysis.

Alongside this group, we formed a Reference Group. The role of this group was to provide additional advice from a range of cultural perspectives. The group was comprised of people who had themselves migrated to Australia and were familiar with the issues of employment within their cultural communities. A number of our research assistants were also members of this group.

The Reference Group advised AMES Research and Policy staff on cultural issues relevant to the proposed areas of inquiry and the methodology of the research. In addition to meeting formally as a group, members of the Reference Group were available to be contacted individually for advice or assistance. They also made themselves available to be interviewed during the piloting of the interview guide, providing advice on the relevance and wording of questions.

Recruitment of research assistants

We recruited nine research assistants for this fourth phase of the Longitudinal Study. We drew on the large number of bilingual AMES staff, including Community Guides, to find people with the languages needed.⁶ We recruited people with whom we had worked in previous research projects and people recommended to us by other Divisions of AMES. Everyone we recruited had worked or was working for AMES in a full time, part time or casual role.

We selected people based on several criteria. The most important of these was having the same language and cultural backgrounds as participants in the study. We required research assistants who understood the potentially sensitive nature of the research and issues relating to employment in their communities. They needed to be comfortable with the data collection tools we were using,

⁵ A report on the findings of the first three years of the Longitudinal Study was completed in 2011 (AMES 2011).

⁶ The Community Guide Program, developed by the AMES Settlement Division in 2005, recruits people who have come to Australia through the humanitarian program to provide settlement support to new people arriving in Victoria through this stream of the immigration program. Of the nine research assistants we recruited, five were Community Guides. An evaluation of the Community Guide Program has been completed by the UNSW Centre for Refugee Research. (Doney, Pittaway & Vu 2009)

including online data collection software, and understand the confidential nature of information collected. Finally, the research assistants needed to be available to work outside business hours.

The research assistants were allocated between eight and 16 people each to interview from a total of 130 potential participants. None of the participants were known to the research assistants outside the Longitudinal Study.

Briefing

The research assistants participated in a briefing session prior to commencing interviews. This session covered:

- the purpose of the research
- cultural issues relevant to the research theme
- the interview questions
- the role of the research assistant
- interview technique
- ethics including confidentiality
- data collection processes and protocols.

The research assistants participated in the briefing as a group. Interviews were practised in pairs and subsequently discussed in the larger group.

During the briefing the personal nature of employment was discussed. Research assistants considered the fact that some people may not be comfortable discussing their work situation or work conditions, particularly in situations of irregular work practices. They were briefed to remind participants that all questions within the interview were voluntary.

Research assistants were free to use their preferred approach in terms of translating the interview questions. Some did this formally as a discrete task before commencing any interviews and worked from a translated set of questions when speaking with participants. Others used the English language interview guide with first language notes written alongside questions where necessary. Research assistants were asked to translate all responses into English keeping to the original responses as closely as possible.

Data collection

Data for the *Finding Satisfying Work* project was collected as follows:

1. The research assistant made contact with each person on their list and sought their consent to participate in the study. If consent was given, a mutually convenient time was arranged to conduct the interview by phone.
2. During the interview the research assistant noted the responses. Some responses were entered directly online in English as the conversation was taking place, others were written in hard copy (in first language or in English) and subsequently entered online.

3. Where participants raised concerns about the research or their personal situation, the research assistant sought their consent to refer this to the AMES Research and Policy Unit to follow up as appropriate.

Research assistants were provided with AMES mobile phones and required to complete their interviews within three weeks.

Support and monitoring

Completed interviews were available to us immediately through the online data collection software. We read the interviews as soon as they were available for two reasons: (i) to check if there were any issues in relation to interview practice and (ii) to check for participant issues requiring follow up. One hundred and two interviews were completed.

We contacted each research assistant regularly to ask how the work was going and discuss any concerns they might have. This practice became less frequent as early issues were resolved and the research assistants became more experienced.

Following completion of the interviews, we met with the research assistants as a group. They each spoke about their work, covering a wide range of issues. These included their experiences of making contact with the participants, the actual interviews and their views on participants' employment situations. This group reflection was a valuable source of information about the participants' lives.

One research assistant was unable to attend this discussion and met separately with us to share her experiences. This meeting also proved to be very valuable as it had a significant influence on how we understood the data she had recorded. Based on the value of these two forms of feedback, we decided to meet with each research assistant again individually to better understand their approach to the work and the data that was recorded.

Discussion

The process of conducting the *Finding Satisfying Work* research raised a number of issues for us in relation to working with bilingual research assistants. We discuss some of the advantages and challenges below.

Employing research assistants with the same language and cultural backgrounds as research participants

In order to understand the views and experiences of the research participants we needed research assistants who spoke the relevant languages. In some cases we required very specific language skills. A group of participants categorised together as 'Chin speaking' in fact required three distinct languages - Hakha Chin, Falam Chin and Burmese – for communication. We employed a research assistant who was fluent in all three languages and was able to communicate effectively with each person. Another research assistant interviewed participants in Dari and Hazaragi, both of which he

was fluent in. The research assistants' ability to communicate with people with whom we ourselves could not speak directly, and whose views might otherwise not have been included, was highly valuable to the project.

Beyond access through language, the research assistants brought cultural backgrounds similar to those of the group of participants they had been assigned. Our assumption in recruiting research assistants was that this affinity would be helpful in establishing trust between the interviewer and the participant. This assumption seemed well founded in most cases, with research assistants themselves commenting on the ease with which they were able to talk with people:

For me it was very, you know, very easy. The people they trust me... Because it was from my community. So they trust me. And from my community... we are Hazaras, we are living in the central part of Afghanistan. (Interview with Research Assistant 3)

Another research assistant noted:

Like, for the first five, I did it in Chinese, Cantonese. They, the interviewees, always felt more comfortable. They spoke a lot, and even something very personal, and even they asked me back about my experience because they know I am maybe the similar background with them, the same country. So I think it does help. (Interview with Research Assistant 1)

All the research assistants had themselves gone through the experience of settling and looking for work in Australia (about half of them within the previous five years) and this was also seen to be an advantage:

I believe that because research assistants have similar experience when they started in the new country, so it gave them a special advantage to gain trust from the interviewees. Therefore, this special position helped to open up an honest and open dialogue from the research participants. (Note from Research Assistant 4)

Block and Erskine (2012, p. 436) suggest that "when the interviewer and interviewee are more similar communication will not only be more likely, but often richer." While we cannot assume that people with shared language and cultural backgrounds will necessarily communicate well with one another, this did appear to be a benefit in this project. It is likely that we will continue to prioritise a shared cultural background between research assistant and participant in future research.

Bilingual research assistants as cultural advisors

In identifying people as potential research assistants we were interested not only in their background but in their capacity to offer a broader cultural perspective. The research assistants in the *Finding Satisfying Work* project assumed this role, offering their views explicitly from a cultural perspective. They made a wide range of suggestions in relation to the interview questions and the data collected, explaining cultural contexts to us. Discussing the merits of including a question about wages, for example, one of our research assistants said:

I know [that] most of the people, they are working cash in hand so it is very difficult, they will feel very scared to tell the truth. (April 2012 Reference Group meeting)

Discussing the types of work newly arrived migrants may take in Australia, another research assistant suggested that some people in her community were so concerned about the interview process required for many roles that they would take informal jobs in order to avoid this:

They are scared to go for the interview because of the language barrier. But if we have, kind of, a business or factory or boss who can employ them without the interview, they would be happy to be placed there and learn from the work. (April 2012 Reference Group meeting)

Commenting on why people with professional backgrounds from her country might take on low skilled jobs rather than improving their English in order to find jobs that use their expertise, another research assistant said:

There is pressure and also there is, kind of like, influence from the previous migrants. They got this kind of work and they've got money. They got settled and so that's how they show other migrants to get into life in Australia. So after little time they start to neglect their language learning. (Interview with Research Assistant 6)

In these and many other ways the research assistants provided information that assisted us to rethink assumptions, amend questions and interpret the data.

Of course no one person can or should be expected to speak for an entire language or cultural community. This was not our expectation and we received the views of the research assistants in the spirit in which they were offered, that is, as personal impressions or insights that could be useful for understanding the employment experiences of the research participants. While the research assistants were very willing to act as cultural informants, they were also sensitive to the diverse points of view and experiences within their respective communities.

Employing AMES staff as research assistants

As noted, our practice has been to employ AMES staff as research assistants in much of our work. The advantages for us are many and include the fact that staff participate in regular organisational training in relation to communication as part of their ongoing roles.

Our experience generally is that most people we contact, both current and former clients, appear to be very willing to participate in our research. In the *Finding Satisfying Work* project 90% of the people the research assistants were able to contact agreed to participate. The research assistants reported that many participants responded positively when they heard that the person calling was 'from AMES'. AMES is often a source of significant support for people who arrive in Victoria with low levels of English and some of the research assistants spoke of the advantage of being associated with AMES:

All of the people I talked [with], they said that AMES English, the education, is very, very good. Because that's the first step in their life. (Research Assistant 8, June 2012 meeting of research assistants)

Another research assistant talked about explicitly using his other role at AMES to reassure participants. He described making contact with potential interviewees and explaining that he was calling to ask if they would participate in research about employment. Initially, he said, they would seem a bit suspicious, perhaps thinking that the call was from the government. When the research assistant said that he was calling from AMES and also worked for AMES Settlement, participants would relax and agree to be interviewed:

They know our organisation, maybe they're happy, you know? (Interview with Research Assistant 2)

Alongside the possible advantages in research assistants being drawn from AMES staff we were aware of potential ambiguities relating to this for both the research assistants and the participants.

The research assistants needed to be clear that the research role was distinct from their usual work: they were calling people as interviewers, not as Housing Officers, Counsellors or Community Guides. They were briefed to position themselves as sympathetic but 'neutral' inquirers and to refer questions about employment, housing and other issues – many of which they would themselves have been able to answer - to the Research and Policy Unit.

As former AMES clients, participants may have found it more difficult to decline an interview requested by someone from AMES rather than someone from an organisation with which they had no previous relationship. We were aware of the possible pressure people we contacted might feel under to agree to an interview. To address this, research assistants were asked to emphasise the voluntary nature of participation.

It is also possible that the interviewer's status as being 'from AMES' may have introduced some bias in responses. Although participants in the *Finding Satisfying Work* project were no longer AMES clients, their previous experiences with AMES may have influenced their responses. The potential for social bias is unavoidable in much research and we always consider the potential effect of this when analysing data from our research. Whilst the advantages of employing AMES staff as research assistants are significant, we need to examine the possible implications of this for the reliability of our findings.

Employing bilingual people without formal interpreting qualifications

A significant implication of employing bilingual AMES staff is that generally our research assistants have not undergone formal accreditation as interpreters or translators. In the *Finding Satisfying Work* project none of the research assistants had formal interpreting qualifications.

AMES respects that interpreting and translation are professional skills. As an organisation we require interpreters with national accreditation to be used in all legal and medical matters and we recognise that there are many situations which require accredited interpreters.

For this project, however, our priority was for research assistants to have a shared cultural background with the participants. The staff we recruited use their English and first language skills daily in their work at AMES. The interview questions were reasonably straightforward and the conversational nature of the interviews allowed for clarification and rephrasing of questions as necessary. Our assessment was that the staff we employed were well placed to conduct the interviews both in terms of language competence and cultural knowledge.

Nevertheless there may be ways in which we can improve our practice whilst employing people without formal accreditation as research assistants. Translation of the interview questions, for instance, is an important step in the research process, and we could consider the use of accredited translators for specific tasks such as this in future research projects.

Interview variability

The issues discussed above relate to the specific language skills and cultural knowledge of the research assistants. In the *Finding Satisfying Project* we became aware of other, more subtle, issues which might be influencing the data collection.

Reading the interviews as they were completed we became conscious of the varying styles of the research assistants. Each person had a distinctive approach and this naturally influenced the data they collected. Interview variability is inevitable in any context where multiple research assistants are employed, including in single language environments. Krosnick (1999) challenges the view that interviews and questionnaires should always be administered in same way. He argues, instead, that variations in how surveys or interviews are administered by different interviewers may in fact add value:

Since the beginning of survey research... interviewers have been expected to read questions exactly as researchers wrote them, identically for all respondents. (...) [But] the meanings of many questions are inherently ambiguous and are negotiated in everyday conversation through back-and-forth exchanges between questioners and answerers. To prohibit such exchanges is to straight-jacket them (...) [Researchers have demonstrated that] when interviewers were free to clarify the meanings of questions and response choices, the validity of reports increased substantially. (Krosnick 1999, pp. 542-43)

Although Krosnick is talking about research in English, the same principle can be argued in a context of multiple languages.

When considering the interview data collected for this project, however, it was sometimes difficult to differentiate between the individual practice of a research assistant and other issues which might be at play. Some of the data we were seeing was distinctly different from that collected through most other interviews. Below we describe two examples.

We noticed that the responses being recorded by one research assistant, Sophie (not her real name), were particularly brief. Qualitative data collected from this group of participants by other research assistants in earlier waves of the Longitudinal Study was also brief. We speculated about the reasons why this group of people might happen to be less forthcoming than the group at large. We made contact with Sophie several times to ask how the work was going but did not take any other action.

After the interviews were completed, we met with Sophie. In this meeting she provided much contextual information about participants' work situations, describing some of the cultural factors informing their decisions in relation to work. This broader information was extremely interesting and not necessarily recorded in the interview data.

Sophie also talked about her own feelings when interviewing the participants and judgements she made when recording their responses. We made the following notes:

It was interesting to talk with Sophie. She told us a number of things about her interviews.

Many people were very disappointed that she was just doing research about their problem - they really wanted help to find work. She said she found this hard to deal with, so her approach was to do short, sharp interviews and not waste their time when she felt she couldn't really help them.

Sophie was reluctant to put down all their problems as she was worried about them being exposed. For example, she said people spoke about being bullied and discriminated against by 'the white man'. She also said that some of the people found it hard to get used to the workplace culture where people here might say disrespectful things and only be joking, whereas that would not be acceptable in their previous countries. (Author note from meeting with Research Assistant 5).

These points shone much light on the data recorded. The interviews may have been brief in part because Sophie, both interviewer and member of this cultural community, was considering the privacy and possibly the reputation of the people she was interviewing. She recorded information she deemed 'safe' and some of the anecdotes she subsequently shared in our meeting were not captured in the formal interview data. If we had not had this conversation we would not have understood these influences on the data.

Our work with Arun (not his real name) was similarly instructive. Although he had been highly recommended to us, we had some concerns about how well equipped Arun was for the work, particularly in terms of using the online software. We suggested that we meet with him following the completion of five interviews so that we could discuss these together and address any issues that might have arisen.

We met as arranged. At this meeting we learned that Arun had successfully reached five participants and had spoken with each person at length. However, he had decided not to use the interview questions as written and had not entered the data online. Instead, he had had long conversations about employment and taken detailed notes in first language. Arun showed us his notes and was able to recall in great detail each participant's circumstances, their feelings about their work and their hopes for the future.

Having established that he had used an entirely different approach, we realised that Arun had in fact covered the territory of the interview and gathered the data we were interested in. In order to record this data, we asked if he could tell us what each participant said in relation to each question so that we could enter this information in English and online retrospectively. We documented the five interviews together in this way.

This method of data collection was unanticipated. Recording the information as we did gave this data a status different from the rest of the data collected in the project. At the same time, Arun's interviews provided useful and richly descriptive information. We were able to record the details we wanted to capture but beyond this in fact were exposed to excellent contextual data. While the approach may have been unconventional, Arun's natural curiosity about the participants' lives and his ability to establish rapport ("It's because I am like an uncle to them") enabled him to gain participants' trust and learn much about their situations.

Further, Arun's own capacity to reflect on the employment situations he heard about assisted us in doing the same. For example, he expressed his surprise on realising, through doing the interviews, that people with low literacy in their own language and very little English can secure full time, permanent work in Australia. Some of the participants in this situation spoke about saving to buy a house and planning private school education for their children. Arun commented:

You know, in my country, when we live in our country, they did not have a vision about the future. But here, I saw, they have a big vision here. So I'm very happy. (Interview with Research Assistant 9)

Weighed against this, he noted the vulnerability of these interviewees in terms of potential changes in the labour market:

Here, the factory worker is the lowest worker. When the economic or the system or the company will become closed, those people will firstly be going out. So I'm afraid. Because they are working now but they do not speak English. So I'm very worried for them. (Interview with Research Assistant 9)

Working with Sophie and Arun highlighted both the value bilingual research assistants can bring through their cultural knowledge and the importance of providing sufficient and appropriate training. Both research assistants brought a wealth of insights which were very useful to us in terms of understanding the employment experiences of the people they interviewed. They were also relatively new to Australia and to formal research and would have benefited from more extensive briefing and practice.

Reflections and implications for our practice

The objective of this paper was to consider our experiences of employing bilingual research assistants both for our own learning and because this might be of interest to others. Working with the research assistants in the *Finding Satisfying Work* project required us to consider many aspects of this relationship and has informed how we will approach similar research projects in the future.

The research assistants in the *Finding Satisfying Work* project brought much more than language skills to their roles. Their understanding of the experiences of their respective communities and their ability to contextualise issues from a cultural point of view had an important influence on the research. As Brough et al (2013, p. 214) write, “cultural translation and trustworthiness of findings are intrinsically connected.” This project reinforced our view that bilingual research assistants can bring valuable cultural insights and, in doing so, assist us in generating reliable findings.

The project also highlighted the potential value of allowing some variability in approach. Interviews for this research were based on a structured set of questions eliciting details about participants’ employment situations. We designed the research with the methodology we thought most likely to give us the data we were interested in. Working with Arun and the other research assistants we became aware that other ways of gathering the information could also have worked. In cross-cultural research, where we are communicating in a context of varying cultural frameworks and values, it is important to consider other ways of doing research. Variability in approach may bring unexpected insights.

The research assistants in this project shared their views on the theme of the research, the proposed interview questions and the data collected. They also spoke about their personal experience of conducting the interviews and their views on the employment situations of participants. By explicitly seeking the input of the research assistants we were able to develop a better understanding of the relationship between the process of data collection and the actual data recorded and also gain a better understanding of the contexts of the data. This in turn helped us to understand the overall picture of employment for participants in the study. In addition to facilitating access to participants’ views, the research assistants acted as “interpretive guides” (Liamputtong 2010, p. 149) in the research.

Our reflections have resulted in a number of strategies. This year we have established a register of AMES staff interested in working as bilingual research assistants. To date more than 60 staff speaking 42 languages have provided details of their language and cultural backgrounds and their availability to assist AMES research in addition to their usual roles. We intend to recruit research assistants from this register in future.

We recognise the importance of allowing more time for thorough briefing of research assistants and supervised practice of interviewing and data collection. While variability can bring insights we need to equip research assistants to conduct their work as professionally as possible. As Tilbury (2006, p. 10) suggests in the context of conducting research with refugees, there is “an ethical imperative to do research which upholds high standards of academic rigour.”

We are considering the ways in which research assistants and Reference Groups may be able to inform future research, including research design, further. Involving research assistants earlier in a project and strengthening the role of a Reference Group are likely to improve the quality of our research.

Conclusion

The views and experiences of recent migrants with low levels of English are commonly underrepresented in research. Gathering information from this group is very important to AMES as we work to support the settlement of migrants in Australia.

Employing people who share the language and cultural backgrounds of research participants gives us access to people who may not typically participate in research. Beyond language, bilingual research assistants bring cultural knowledge and a familiarity with a cultural community which can be very helpful in understanding the experiences of research participants. Bilingual research assistants have a capacity to contextualise issues from a cultural point of view and this can have an important influence on the research.

In the *Finding Satisfying Work* project, we were interested in understanding the employment experiences of a group of people who arrived in Australia with low levels of English. Working with the research assistants enabled us to appreciate the diversity in these experiences and the varying challenges faced by migrants in relation to work. The findings from this research will inform our service delivery as well as our advocacy in relation to employment. The bilingual research assistants played a vital role in making this possible.

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