

Explicit Instruction: An Evidence-Based Practice to Support Students with Exceptionalities in Inclusion using Lesson Planning

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Abstract

Intentional lesson planning is crucial for providing equitable education to students with exceptionalities within inclusive settings. While explicit instruction is known to benefit diverse learners, its application in improving reading comprehension skills for students with exceptionalities in inclusive settings remains underexplored. This article explores using explicit instruction as an evidence-based practice to enhance the learning for students with exceptionalities in inclusive settings and provides a case study illustrating how explicit instruction supports the individualized learning needs through structured scaffolding, accommodations, and differentiation in alignment with the state standards. When implementing explicit instruction effectively by planning it thoroughly, educators can create inclusive classrooms that uphold high academic expectations while addressing diverse learning needs of all students, including students with exceptionalities.

Keywords: *explicit instruction, inclusion, lesson planning, gradual release of responsibility*

Inclusion classrooms are to provide an education for students with exceptionalities to ensure they are receiving the necessary support to thrive academically and socially. To meet the diverse learning needs of these students, teachers must use instructional practices that promote clarity, engagement, and mastery of content. Many teacher appraisal systems emphasize the importance of intentional lesson planning that accommodates the varying needs of all learners, which recognizes that effective instruction begins with a thoughtful and purposeful design. Therefore, explicit instruction, with its structured approach and clear teaching strategies, aligns closely with lesson planning and provides an effective framework for supporting students in inclusive classrooms. In this article, I explore how a general education teacher implements explicit instruction's Gradual Release of Responsibility model that uses the components of modeling, guided practice, independent practice, and feedback to enhance the learning for students with exceptionalities in an inclusion setting.

Alex is a 5th-grade student diagnosed with dyslexia, a learning disability that primarily affects his ability to read and write. He's the kind of student who can tell you a detailed, fictional story, but when it's time to read a chapter in a book or write down his own amazing story, he struggles. Alex struggles with decoding words as he reads,

reading fluency, and spelling, and these areas of weakness are impacting his comprehension and written expression. Within the inclusion English Language Arts classroom, Alex often feels frustrated during independent reading and writing tasks. He watches the other students read smoothly while he's still struggling with the first sentence. He feels like he's falling behind. He loves stories and loves the way they make him feel, but when he tries to write them down, he can't. Alex has an individualized education program that provides accommodations to help him in the classroom with his areas of weakness. These include:

- *Extended time on reading and writing assignments,*
- *Audiobooks to support comprehension, and*
- *Graphic organizers to assist with structuring writing.*

T-TESS

The State of Texas uses T-TESS as its official teacher appraisal system. T-TESS is designed to support the continuous growth and development of teachers by providing a framework for effective instructional practices and reflective teaching. It focuses on improving student outcomes through high-quality teaching and aligns with the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) standards. One of the first key dimensions of T-TESS is [Dimension](#)

1.1: Lesson Planning. This dimension emphasizes the importance of thoughtful, standards-based, and student-centered instructional design based on the needs of the students. It evaluates how well a teacher aligns lesson objectives with curriculum and state standards. It also wants the teacher to differentiate instruction and plans effectively to meet the diverse needs of all students within the classroom (*T-TESS*).

Each dimension within T-TESS is broken into five domains: distinguished, accomplished, proficient, developing, and needs improvement. Teachers aim to be proficient or higher on this evaluation rating scale for their observations. For a teacher to be considered proficient in T-TESS Dimension 1.1 Lesson Planning, they must demonstrate their areas of strength across four essential descriptors in this domain: 1) Define the learning objectives and align with the state standards; 2) Design structured and purposeful lesson activities that engage all students; 3) Differentiate instruction to meet the diverse needs of students, including students with exceptional needs (ESN); and 4) Use formative assessment to guide instruction and ensure student understanding. Teachers must set clear, measurable, and achievable learning objectives that are directly tied to the TEKS, and the objectives should clearly articulate what students are expected to learn and accomplish by the end of the lesson. The activities should be well-structured and aligned with the learning objectives and TEKS; and they should encourage critical thinking, collaboration, and inquiry using a variety of instructional strategies and materials. This means that teachers must be effective in lesson planning to create engaging and meaningful activities that promote active student participation and deeper understanding within the curriculum. They must also adapt their instruction to accommodate all students' abilities, backgrounds, and learning preferences, including students ESN and English Bilinguals. This may involve modifying the content, process, or product of the curriculum, and/or providing additional supports for students. Lastly, teachers must use formative assessments to monitor student progress and use the data gathered from these assessments to make informed instructional decisions to adjust their pacing, revisit concepts, or provide targeted interventions.

Lesson Planning

Across the United States, teacher appraisal systems, regardless of the state, are designed to promote the continuous growth and professional development of educators by emphasizing effective instructional practices and reflective teaching. These appraisal systems are designed to evaluate how effectively teachers plan and deliver instruction that aligns with academic standards while also meeting the individual needs of their students. Strong lesson planning typically requires teachers to (a) clearly define the learning objectives related to the state standards, (b) design purposeful lesson activities to actively engage students in meaningful learning, (c) differentiate instruction to meet the diverse needs of all students, and (d) use a variety of assessments to guide instructional decisions and promote student growth. To meet the expectations for effective planning, teachers must be able to set clear and measurable goals that articulate what students should know and be able to do by the end of a lesson. The instructional activities should be aligned with the objectives, promote critical thinking, and provide opportunities for collaboration and inquiry. While planning, a teacher must also account for the varying student abilities and learning preferences; this includes modifying the content, process, or product as needed and integrating supports such as scaffolding, language accommodations, or assistive technology to ensure all learners can access and engage with the material. Lesson planning is more than a checklist of items a teacher needs to do to teach students; it is a process where they are reflecting their ability to foster an inclusive, engaging, and responsive learning environment for all students, including students with exceptionalities in an inclusive classroom.

Special Education and Inclusion

Students with exceptionalities should always be considered for placement according to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, which is a special education law that is responsible for ensuring equitable educational opportunities for students with exceptionalities. Special education is a civil right that supports equal opportunity, full participation, independent living, and economic self-sufficiency of students with exceptionalities (Turnbull et al., 2020). To ensure access to meaningful educational experiences, students with exceptionalities receive a free appropriate public education supported by an

Individualized Education Program (IEP). The landmark Supreme Court case, *Endrew F. v. Douglas County School District* in 2017, established that students with disabilities are deserving of an educational program that supports their growth and progress based on their individual circumstances and tailored to their unique needs (Turnbull et al., 2020). This elevated the standard within special education and moved beyond minimal the benefits that were being provided. Now, all students being served in special education, including those with exceptionalities, have the right to meaningful academic progress.

Creating an inclusive education environment requires commitment to equity at all levels, ensuring that students with disabilities have access to a variety of learning opportunities. When students with exceptionalities are in general education, they must receive targeted support, specialized instruction, and appropriate interventions to help them build knowledge and skills (Jokinen, 2018; Ryan & Bowman, 2023). One type of targeted support is explicit instruction, which is an evidence-based practice that improves academic outcomes for diverse learners, including those with learning disabilities and exceptionalities (Foxworth et al., 2022).

Explicit Instruction

Explicit instruction is a structured and systematic practice that emphasizes direct teaching of specific skills and concepts. Whereas explicit instruction is normally seen as a teacher-directed approach, it can be aligned with constructivist principles to ensure students are actively engaged with the content. The constructivist theory leans on the beliefs that learners build knowledge by connecting new information to existing cognitive structures (Naraian, 2019). Explicit instruction supports this by providing structured guidance before allowing independent exploration or work as it follows a predictable sequence every time that gradually transfers that responsibility from the teacher to the student (Foxworth et al., 2022). Within explicit instruction, the comprehensive process includes (a) setting clear objectives, (b) providing step-by-step demonstrations through modeling, (c) guiding student practice, (d) fostering independent practice, and (e) offering immediate, specific feedback (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983; Satsangi et al., 2019). This follows the Gradual Release of

Responsibility (GRR) model shown in Figure 1 and scaffolds the structure to benefit students with exceptionalities because it can be attributed to reduced demands on a student's working memory, which receives and processes new information, tasks, and problems (Foxworth et al., 2022; Martin & Evans, 2018; Smith et al., 2018).

Research has shown that explicit instruction yields meaningful academic outcomes for a diverse group of learners, including students with exceptionalities and learning disabilities (Foxworth et al., 2022). Explicit instruction is particularly recommended for students who have little prior knowledge of the content, extensive histories of failure, or little familiarity with complex tasks (McCleery & Tindal, 1999). For students with exceptionalities, explicit instructional practices reduce the cognitive load by helping students focus on the most important information at hand. Morris et al. (2021) have identified explicit instruction as a critical instructional method for closing the achievement gap and increasing the educational outcomes for students with emotional and behavioral disorders. Therefore, the scaffolding provided during guided practice in explicit instruction helps students perform well and builds their confidence in their ability to perform new skills. Within inclusion classrooms, teachers can plan to implement explicit instruction to support and meet diverse learning needs while maintaining high standards for all students.

Explicit instruction provides the pedagogical framework for teachers working in inclusive settings while directly supporting teachers in their lesson planning. For designing structured and purposeful activities that engage all students, the explicit instruction practice offers a scaffolded structure outlined in Figure 1 that systematically builds student competence through teacher modeling, guided practice, and independent practice (Foxworth et al., 2022). This approach is valuable in inclusive settings where the GRR model during guided practice ensures that students with varying abilities can access content at appropriate levels of support. When addressing the emphasis on differentiation for diverse needs, explicit instruction provides teachers a variety of ways to adapt their teaching to find the best way to meet each student's needs.

Explicit instruction's emphasis on checking for understanding through systematic monitoring aligns with the idea of using a variety of assessments such as formative assessments. Anderson (2019) emphasizes that teachers should give children sufficient time to apply their developing word-solving skills while offering only the level of support necessary for success. This approach requires ongoing assessment to determine appropriate levels of support for all students. Satsangi et al. (2019) highlights how explicit instruction includes the teacher illustrating step-by-step strategies designed to solve specific problems, with immediate, specific feedback. This is a practice that supports formative assessment as teachers are monitoring student progress through guided practice. This integration allows teachers to meet to address various student needs through the flexible activities designed with diverse learners in mind.

Unlike what some may assume, implementing explicit instruction in an inclusion classroom complements differentiation efforts rather than conflicting with them. According to Naraian (2019), constructivist pedagogy and explicit instruction can complement one another and support a wide range of learners. This suggests that teachers who are skilled in explicit instruction can still meet the expectations of lesson planning within most teacher appraisal systems while effectively addressing the diverse needs of students in an inclusive classroom. Therefore, through the integration of explicit instruction, teachers can create multiple ways for students to engage with content, demonstrate understanding, and receive appropriate scaffolding all while maintaining high expectations aligned with state standards. This approach demonstrates how the teacher strategically planned and implemented explicit instruction supports meaningful learning for all students in inclusive settings.

Alex's teacher is teaching a lesson on character analysis aligned with TEKS 5.9Di: The student recognizes and analyzes genre-specific characteristics, structures and purposes within and across increasingly complex traditional, contemporary, classical, and diverse texts. The student is expected to recognize characteristics and structures of informational text, including the central idea with supporting evidence (Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills for Grade 5).

This standard requires students to determine multiple main ideas in informational text and explain how these ideas are supported by key details. The teacher can apply the GRR model of explicit instruction during guided practice and use differentiation throughout the lesson for content and product to ensure that all students, including Alex, can engage with and master the skill with the literacy TEK 5.9Di.

For Alex, effective lesson planning requires the integration of evidence-based accommodations, and the teacher must address all diverse learning needs in the classroom through differentiated instructional strategies. So in designing a learning environment following the steps in GRR model that is both academically rigorous and accessible, the teacher ensures that all students are given equitable opportunities to master the learning standard, which promotes meaningful academic achievement.

Step 1: Setting the Learning Objectives

Establishing clear learning objectives is a foundational and first step of effective explicit instruction for students with exceptionalities in inclusive settings. According to Foxworth et al. (2022), establishing the lesson's objectives during the introduction of the lesson allows both the teacher and students to focus on the essential content they will be learning. Research agrees that well-designed learning objectives serve multiple purposes in lessons that are designed using explicit instruction (McCleery & Tindal 1999). A clear explanation of learning objectives to the students helps them understand the purpose of the learning activities. Additionally, for students with learning disabilities who may struggle with building on their prior knowledge, the explicitly stated learning objectives provide essential structure to the lesson.

TEKS 5.9Di focuses on the ability of students to determine multiple main ideas in informational text and explain how they are supported by key details. For Alex, this standard presents a significant challenge due to his struggles with reading comprehension and written expression. Therefore, the lesson must be carefully scaffolded to break down the complex task of main idea analysis into manageable steps in order to address the following learning objectives:

1. *Students will be able to identify and describe multiple main ideas presented in informational text.*
2. *Students will be able to explain how key details support each main idea in the text.*
3. *Students will be able to use specific examples from the text to support their analysis and create a summary that includes the main ideas.*

Step 2: Modeling

Modeling is the next step of explicit instruction and provides students with a clear example of how to approach a task or skill. Teachers must be clear, concise, and consistent to ensure that students can follow the logical progression of steps within the strategy or content being modeled (Foxworth et al., 2022). It is the “I do” approach outlined in Figure 1, and it places explicit instruction as teacher-centered, with the teacher doing the majority of the thinking to guide students toward independence (Archer and Hughes, 2011). By directing students’ attention to essential content and minimizing their cognitive load, explicit modeling reduces the demands on students’ working memory, making learning more accessible. When implementing modeling, teachers should incorporate both cognitive and metacognitive thinking processes. This allows students to observe not just what steps to take but also *why* those steps are appropriate (Satsangi et al., 2019).

In inclusion classrooms, modeling is especially beneficial for students with learning disabilities or processing challenges, as it breaks down complex tasks into manageable steps (McCleery & Tindal, 1999). Research indicates that explicit modeling is particularly effective in mathematics instruction for students with learning disabilities, with students achieving “80.0 percent or greater accuracy scores” following explicit instruction interventions (Satsangi et al., 2019, p. 41). Teachers can use think-aloud strategies to verbalize their cognitive processes, helping students understand problem-solving approaches. For example, in a math lesson on fractions, a teacher might demonstrate partitioning a whole into equal parts while explaining the reasoning behind each step. Similarly, in literacy instruction, modeling word-solving strategies helps developing readers to decode words. Anderson (2019) emphasizes that teachers should “explicitly model for children how to use the strategy” (p.

180). To maximize the effectiveness of explicit instruction, modeling should be planned before implementing with students.

After introducing the learning objectives for TEKS 5.9Di, the teacher engages in explicit modeling through a think-aloud strategy while reading an informational text. As they read, they pause to discuss their thoughts aloud about potential main ideas and supporting details. This structured approach allows students to observe both the process of analysis and the reasoning behind it; and it helps reinforce their cognitive and metacognitive thinking.

To further support comprehension, the teacher incorporates a visual anchor chart that tracks main ideas and corresponding supporting details from the text. The chart includes key phrases and organizational patterns to help students visualize how information is structured and recognize relationships between ideas in the text. Additionally, the teacher provides sentence frames to scaffold student responses so that they can have a structured way to articulate their thoughts. An example sentence frame could be: “One main idea in this text is ... The author supports this idea with evidence such as ... and ...”. For Alex specifically, the teacher implements additional scaffolds to ensure access to the lesson such as a color-coded text with highlighted keywords to support word recognition, reduce his cognitive load, and enhance comprehension. He uses his accommodation of the speech-to-text software for notetaking, which allows him to focus on identifying main ideas rather than the mechanics of writing.

Step 3: Guided Practice

Guided practice is the bridge between teacher-led instruction and independent application. It is where the GRR model is utilized most as the explicit instruction starts to become more student-centered where the students begin to apply new skills with structured support and feedback and is crucial in managing students’ cognitive load (Morris et al., 2021). Through visual, verbal, and physical prompts, teachers can help students develop the skills necessary for long-term retention and mastery of the skills being taught (Stark et al., 2024).

Research suggests that students with exceptionalities benefit significantly from structured guidance and scaffolds before moving into independent tasks (Morris et al., 2021). In an inclusion classroom, guided practice should be differentiated through small-group instruction, peer collaboration, and/or scaffolded tasks. For example, when teaching comprehension strategies in a reading classroom, teachers could use partners with discussion prompts to help students engage with the text while receiving the structured support. This is guided instruction embedded in the explicit instruction framework. The scaffolding process is not just about providing support to the students but ensuring that teachers are reducing the support being provided as students demonstrate mastery at the task (i.e., systematically fading supports; Morris et al., 2021). The ultimate goal of guided practice is to build student confidence and independence before they can move to working independently.

After the teacher has modeled the lesson, students will transition into small-groups for guided practice where they analyze a different informational text using teacher-provided prompts focused on identifying main ideas and supporting details. This collaborative setting will allow the students to discuss ideas, ask questions, and refine their understanding before moving to independent work, which is the next step. To accommodate the diverse learning needs of the students in the classroom, the teacher differentiates the text format according to their specific needs. Alex's group receives a modified text and text-to-speech functionality. The teacher also provides graphic organizers with sections for main ideas and supporting evidence to help students structure their analysis. Additionally, Alex uses the speech-to-text software to assist him in articulating his responses. By incorporating assistive technology, Alex can participate fully in the lesson without being hindered by his writing challenges. The teacher continually monitors students to provide feedback specifically on how well students are identifying multiple main ideas and connecting them to supporting details in the text.

Step 4: Independent Practice

Independent practice occurs after guided instruction once students show mastery of the content and that they are ready to work independently. In this stage of explicit instruction, students are able to apply their newly acquired

skills with little to no teacher support, so it should be structured to provide opportunities for students to be able apply their newly learned skills in varied contexts. Effective independent practice should be designed with awareness of how cognitive load affects students with exceptionalities; therefore, having thoughtfully designed independent practice opportunities serve multiple purposes beyond skill repetition. For students with exceptionalities, strategically scaffolding supports within independent practice can support the students and allow them to be successful. The supports can include visuals, step-by-step reminders, graphic organizers, oral explanations, or clearly defined starting points to help reduce demands on their working memory (Foxworth et al., 2022; Martin & Evans, 2018; Smith et al., 2018).

When the students show that they are ready for independent practice, they will apply their understanding by analyzing an informational text and identifying its main ideas with supporting details. To ensure accessibility and allow differentiation of product, students are given multiple options such as (a) write a summary paragraph using a graphic organizer to structure their main ideas and supporting details, (b) record a verbal response explaining the multiple main ideas and how they are supported by key details, or (c) create a concept map with annotations to visually demonstrate the relationships between main ideas and supporting evidence. By offering these choices to the students, the teacher ensures that all students can demonstrate mastery of the learning target in a way that suits their learning preferences. Alex chooses to record an audio response using additional accommodations that include a structured guide with key sentence stems focused on main ideas and supporting evidence. This alternative format allows Alex to focus on content and analysis rather than being limited by the mechanics of writing, and it allows him the opportunity to show mastery of TEKS 5.9Di.

Step 5: Feedback

The last component of explicit instruction is feedback, which is interwoven into guided practice and independent practice. Effective feedback is essential for guiding student growth and closing learning gaps. In an inclusion classroom, feedback should be specific, timely, and actionable, providing students with clear next steps for improvement (de Kleijn, 2023). For students with

exceptionalities, feedback operates within their Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which refers to the gap between what a learner can do independently and what they can achieve with guidance from an adult or collaboration with more capable peers (de Kleijn, 2023). This framework is valuable when providing feedback in inclusive classrooms because it recognizes that effective feedback must be aligned to each student's current abilities while continually pushing them forward. When teachers provide feedback within the framework of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), they engage students in scaffolded learning experiences or instruction that support growth by gradually guiding them toward greater independence (de Kleijn, 2023). This approach acknowledges that students with exceptionalities may require different types and intensities of feedback compared to their peers. For example, a student with a learning disability might initially receive more explicit, step-by-step feedback that gradually becomes less direct as the student develops greater skill mastery, and the teacher may use feedback strategies that may include visual cues such as color-coding, checklists, and one-on-one conferences. This gradual release approach to feedback aligns to the explicit instruction model where the scaffolds are gradually removed to support students in learning to self-regulate in their learning in order to demonstrate their mastery of the content (Foxworth et al., 2022). Therefore, feedback becomes an instructional tool that helps the student grow rather than remaining dependent on the teacher.

To reinforce learning during guided and independent practice, the teacher provides specific and immediate feedback that is tailored to each of the student's needs. Alex receives feedback on his oral recorded response where the teacher highlights strengths and areas for improvement using a checklist focused on main idea identification and supporting evidence analysis. Additionally, the teacher conducts a one-on-one feedback session with Alex, where she uses student-friendly language to ensure clarity in changes he needs to make, particularly around differentiating between main ideas and supporting details in informational text. The teacher encourages Alex to reflect on his response and make revisions using his assistive technology. Overall, Alex receives both oral and written feedback from the teacher and is encouraged to revise his response using speech-to-text tools, which ensure

he has the necessary supports to refine and strengthen his work to master the content.

Implementation in an Inclusion Classroom

For a novice special education teacher in an inclusion classroom, implementing explicit instruction requires collaboration with a general education teacher as well as a strong grasp of the explicit instruction framework. The lesson planning should be intentional, and specific attention given to how the instructional content will be delivered, who will lead each segment of the lesson, and how accommodations or modifications will be integrated to meet diverse learner needs. This process begins with a deep understanding of the GRR model, as shown in Figure 1, and how this model supports all students, particularly those with exceptionalities. Then to strengthen implementation in an inclusive setting, educators should collaboratively design their lesson and instructional strategies to anticipate where targeted support may be necessary in each phase of the explicit instruction framework: modeling, guided practice, and independent practice, but still embedding opportunities for scaffolding, differentiation, and formative assessment. Thoughtful lesson planning serves as the foundation for successful implementation of explicit instruction for students with exceptionalities in an inclusion classroom and enables both teachers to provide consistent, clear, and supportive instruction that leads to meaningful student engagement and achievement.

Then during the modeling phase, the teachers can incorporate visual aids, anchor charts, and think-alouds can help reduce cognitive load for students. It is also important to determine which teacher will lead the demonstration while the other teacher reinforces key concepts or monitors student engagement. In the guided practice phase, both teachers should integrate differentiated scaffolds such as sentence frames, graphic organizers, or structured prompts to address the learning needs of all students. Additionally, intentionally grouping students based on their needs will balance their strengths and areas for growth and encourages active participation and supports peer collaboration. While students are working during guided practice and independent practice, establishing clear and consistent routines for checking their understanding in a timely manner and being able to provide specific feedback will

significantly enhance learning outcomes and promote student success, which is an important component in the GRR as noted in Figure 1 (Satsangi et al., 2019).

Conclusion

Explicit instruction serves as a pedagogical approach when implemented during lesson planning to effectively support students with exceptionalities in inclusive classrooms. Through the structured framework of the GRR model, teachers can create learning environments that are both rigorous and accessible for all students. The research presented in this article shows the importance of explicit instruction as an evidence-based practice as it reduces cognitive load for students, builds their confidence, and promotes their mastery of the content. When teachers thoughtfully plan and implement the components of explicit instruction within their inclusive classrooms, they can create ways for students to engage with the content, demonstrate their understanding, and receive the appropriate support while still maintaining the high expectations aligned with the state standards.

In the case of Alex, it demonstrates how explicit instruction can be strategically implemented to support a student with dyslexia in developing complex skills such as analyzing main ideas and supporting evidence in informational text. By breaking down the parts of lesson planning into actionable components and aligning them with explicit instruction practices, teachers can simultaneously meet evaluation standards while addressing the diverse needs of their students. This approach does not compromise the constructivist principles but rather enhances them by providing the necessary scaffolding for students to actively construct meaning from informational text and develop independence in identifying multiple main ideas and explaining how they are supported by key details.

As educators strive to create truly inclusive educational environments that fulfill both the legal mandates of IDEA

and to provide quality education for all students, explicit instruction emerges as an essential tool. When implemented with fidelity and sensitivity to the individual needs of students, explicit instruction not only meets the expectations of most teacher appraisal systems but also enhances the learning experience for all students, including those with exceptionalities. This approach helps ensure that students like Alex can access the curriculum, develop critical skills, and make meaningful academic progress in their least restrictive environment. Overall, explicit instruction is a practice that is to be utilized to scaffold learning and support students as they obtain mastery of the content. As educators strive to support every learner's success, adopting explicit instructional practices helps create an inclusive, empowering learning environment where all students can thrive.

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