The L1 in the L2 Classroom

Jason Parry, 2011

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Does a learner's L1 have a place in the ESL classroom? If so, how should it be used, and to what extent before it becomes detrimental to the learning process?

According to contemporary teaching practices we are led to believe that the L1 has no role whatsoever in teaching, and should be avoided at all costs (Cook, 2001). Also, in terms of teaching methodology there is very little attention given to the L1 and when it is given it is usually only referenced in terms of how to avoid it (Atkinson, 1987).

Research however, demonstrates that the L1 has a powerful influence on second language learning (Swan, 1997). Unlike the L1, which is learned without the presence of another language, the L2 is learned in relation to the L1 (Cook, 2001). Being such a ubiquitous force, it seems only logical not to avoid it, but to address it head on.

In the following sections, I will try to justify that by integrating a broad communicative approach with the judicious use of the L1 in the classroom, teachers can accelerate language acquisition. This will be accomplished by first examining the historical roots of the L2 only teaching approach, then by evaluating theoretical assumptions which support and refute exclusive use of the L2, and finally by enumerating some pedagogical uses for the L1.

Historical Roots and Current Use of the Monolingual Approach in the L2 Classroom

Although the idea of avoiding the L1 in the L2 classroom can be traced back to the advent of the direct method in 1882, today's practice of L1 avoidance is more closely rooted in politics than in teaching methodology (Artemeva, 1995, p.115). According to Auerbach (1993), this began as a result of an "increasingly xenophobic atmosphere in the early 20th century" (p. 12)

in America. Due to World War I and an influx of immigrants from Europe, the nation had grown suspicious of the extent to which the foreign influence had caused the poor economic and political situation of the time. In response to this, good English was equated with patriotism and there was a dramatic increase in the popularity of ESL instruction. English only practices became the standard in the classroom, and "direct methods stressing oral English gained favor over methods which allowed the use of the students' native language" (Auerbach, 1993, p.13).

Since, the monolingual approach has been fueled by increased funding for English language training in Britain in the 1950s and 1960s (Harbord, 1992, p. 350). Furthermore, monolingual English teachers benefit from L1 avoidance practices, as they are able to find employment despite competition from teachers who are able to speak and utilize their students L1 in the classroom (Artemeva, 1996, p.115).

Cook (2001) claims that more recently English only approaches to teaching have become so widely accepted that use of the L1 or its existence are no longer even considered. A Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach, for example, takes no interest in the L1 as a classroom resource. Instead, CLT only seems to be concerned with the L1 when it is considering ways to minimize its use. This is well evidenced by contemporary teaching manuals such as those by Duff and Polio (1990), Halliwell and Jones (1991), Scrivenor (1994), and Macaro (1997), where the use of the L1 is never mentioned, or only mentioned as a potential problem which must be minimized (see Cook, 2001, p.404-405).

Studies, however, repeatedly demonstrate that despite the lack of support in the literature, teachers do use the L1 in the classroom to various degrees. In a study conducted by Macaro in 2001, the L1 was used in French secondary school classes 7% of the time. Duff and Polio (1990) also found that the L1 was used 7% of the time in a German university class whereas Rolin-

Ianziti & Brownlie (2002) accounted for L1 use 9% of the time in a university French class. L1 use also accounted for "17 to 42% in Edstrom (2006), and 0 to 90% in Duff and Polio (1990)" (Del la Campa and Nassaji, 2009, p.756).

A great deal of research has also been done to determine the purposes of L1 use in the classroom. Setting out to determine when teachers tend to use the L1 rather than the TL, Polio and Duff (1994, in Levine, 2003) found that they had a tendency to engage in "intrasentential codeswitching" (p.345), whereby they would translate specific lexicon to the L1 mid-sentence. Furthermore, the researchers found that teachers dealt with communication breakdowns, grammar lessons, and classroom management in the L1.

In a similar study, Nzwanga (2000, in Levine, 2003) "found that the L1 was also likely to occur during pair or group work (presumably among the students), before a quiz, or during the presentation stage (presumably by the instructor)" (p. 345). In 2001, Macaro (in Levine, 2003) found that the L1 was used for discipline and classroom management, as well as "for the sake of efficiency and expediency" (p.345).

To determine teacher attitudes towards L1 use, Auerbach (1993) conducted a brief survey which questioned teachers about their L1 beliefs. She found that the majority of teachers surveyed felt that the L1 has no place in the classroom, and "assigned a negative value to 'lapses' into the L1, seeing them as failures or aberrations, a cause for guilt" (p.14).

It seems that in the case of L1 use in the classroom, there are large discrepancies between teacher beliefs, teacher practices, and the literature. Since these inconsistencies exist among language teachers, it is important to evaluate which standpoints have merit and which do not. This will be accomplished by evaluating some assumptions supporting the monolingual approach

to language teaching and by introducing some theoretical support and classroom applications for the L1.

Theoretical Assumptions Supporting an L2 Only Classroom

Seeing that the monolingual approach has been successfully employed as a central tenet to language teaching for over 100 years, some would assert that its longevity gives merit to its continued use (Cook, 2001, p.405). That being said, by accepting this tenet without evaluating its merit teachers are unable to assess the potential benefits of classroom L1 use.

Perhaps one of the most popular assumptions which support the exclusive use of the TL in the classroom is the L1's association with the grammar-translation method. By using the L1 in the classroom, teachers feel that they are employing an outdated methodology which has been repeatedly proven to be ineffective. Atkinson (1992), however, argues that the total rejection of the L1 in relation to the grammar-translation is "clearly a case in which the baby [is] thrown out with the bathwater" (Atkinson, 1987, p.242). According to Piasecka (1986),

> Teaching bilingually does not mean a return to the Grammar Translation method, but rather a standpoint which accepts that the thinking, feeling, and artistic life of a person is very much rooted in their mother tongue. If the communicative approach is to live up to its name, then there are many occasions in which the original impulse to speak can only be found in the mother tongue (Piasecka in Auerbach, 1993, p.20).

Although learning a language exclusively by means of translation from the L1 has been proven ineffective, these findings should not prohibit all possible applications of the L1 in a classroom. According to Nation (2003), "the L1 provides a familiar and effective way of quickly getting to grips with the meaning and content of what needs to be used in the L2. It is foolish to arbitrarily exclude this proven and efficient means of communicating meaning" (p.5).

Research, for instance, consistently supports the use of bilingual dictionaries over monolingual dictionaries as a method of vocabulary acquisition (Nation, 2001, p.4). In contrast, monolingual dictionaries designed for low proficiency learners use around 2000 words for their definitions. And although there is an attempt to grade language to facilitate learning, this cannot be a substitute for the direct nature of L1 translation.

Furthermore, according to Nation (2003) and Atkinson (1987), it is the natural tendency of a learner to use translation techniques as a learning strategy. Regardless of the efficacy of other teaching methodologies, it is logical to assume that students, who believe in a certain learning technique, are likely to benefit from its implementation. According to Atkinson (1993), as teachers we often dismiss what our students believe is best for them, by opting to use exotic or modern teaching techniques in the classroom. He contends that this is "in order to demonstrate our status as professionals, often as a reaction to the rather uncomfortable feeling engendered by an awareness of how little we really do know about learning than our students" (p.242). Maintaining authority, however, is not a strong enough reason for excluding an entire language from a classroom.

Similar to an aversion to the grammar-translation method, is the assumption that the L1 interferes with the L2. This is attributed to the characteristic problems associated with specific learners who share the same L1. Differences between the two languages in areas such as phonology, semantics, or syntax, lead to various predictable mistakes and difficulties for L2 speakers.

There is no reason for these findings to lead to the avoidance of the L1 in the classroom though. While transfer from the L1 can contribute to errors in the L2, it can also lead to improvements (Artemeva, 1995, p. 118). Knowledge, for example, of cognates, false cognates,

cultural differences, differences in attitudes towards formality, and conceptual differences in

meaning between the L1 and the target language (TL) can all be an invaluable resource to a

language learner. By promoting an awareness of the similarities and differences between the L1

and the TL, students can develop strategies which will allow them to effectively transfer their

knowledge of their L1 to the L2. (see Swan, 1998).

By drawing a student's attention to these similarities and differences, Cummins (2007)

contends that teachers can support five major types of L1-L2 transfer:

- Transfer of conceptual elements (e.g. understanding the concept of photosynthesis)
- Transfer of metacognitive and metalinguistic strategies (e.g. strategies of visualizing, use of graphic organizers, mnemonic devices, vocabulary acquisition strategies, etc.)
- Transfer of pragmatic aspects of language use (willingness to take risks in communication through L2, ability to use paralinguistic features such as gestures to aid communication, etc.)
- Transfer of specific linguistic elements (knowledge of the meaning of photo in photosynthesis)
- Transfer of phonological awareness—the knowledge that words are composed of distinct sounds (p.233).

Proponents of the monolingual approach also believe that effective L2 acquisition can

only be done when it is acquired in the same manner as the L1 is. While the explicit 'learning' of

a language is seen as worthless, the tacit 'acquisition' of a language is valued. Del la Campa and

Nassaji (2009) suggest that this stems from "naturalistic approaches to language teaching," such

as those proposed by Krashen in the early 80s (p.743). However, L1 acquisition cannot be

confused with L2 acquisition. The L1 is acquired in the absence of an L2, by children who lack

the maturity, social skills, and memory capacity that adults have when they are learning a new

language. Since L2 learners already have the ability to vocalize meaning in their L1, and since

L2 learners cannot learn in the absence of knowledge of another language, it is impossible for

teachers to duplicate the L1 acquisition process in a classroom (Cook, 2001, p.406). It is

impossible for L2 learners to leave their L1 at the door when they enter the language classroom, and illogical for teachers to treat their students like they have.

Advocates of monolingualism also view the use of the L1 as a missed opportunity for TL input, which ultimately decreases the "quantity of comprehensible L2 input" and results in hampered learning (De la Campa and Nassaji, 2009, p. 743).

Chambers also concedes that "it is of great importance that pupils are exposed to the target language as much as is reasonably possible" (p.27), however, he contends that in some situations - such as in dealing with disruptions in class - students can benefit more from the L1. According to Turnbull (2001), "maximizing the TL does not and should not mean that it is harmful for the teacher to use the L1. A principal that promotes maximal teacher use of the TL acknowledges that the L1 and TL should be seen as complementary, depending on the characteristics and stages of the language learning process" (p.525).

Arguments Supporting the Use of the L1 in the Classroom

Given the aforementioned assumptions supporting the exclusive use of the L2, it seems that the monolingual approach "rests on unexamined assumptions, and serves to reinforce inequities in the broader social order" (Auerbach, 1993, p.9).

Nonetheless, many compelling arguments have been put forward which justify the use of the L1 in the classroom. First and foremost, use of the L1 can be practical in a classroom setting. Contact time with a teacher in the classroom is extremely valuable, and sometimes it is illogical to expend a great deal of effort eliciting the meaning of an irrelevant term or giving instructions in the TL. If the potential input (e.g. abstract vocabulary, or classroom instructions) is useless to the students, then it is better to convey its meaning as quickly as possible using the L1, allowing

time for more important issues (Chambers, 1991). If the teacher is familiar with the L1, this can be done with ease and with little preparation (Atkinson, 1987). Otherwise, technological advances such as smart phone translators and other online dictionaries make this effortless to accomplish - regardless of the teacher's language proficiency in the student's L1.

According to Chambers (1991), in some classroom situations the student does not have enough contact with the TL to learn by acquisition, so learning explicitly is the only option. For example, "a single period on a Monday afternoon followed by a double on a Thursday morning, with immersion in non-target language culture in between, precludes the possibility of acquisition …[so] shortcuts have to be taken" (Chambers, 1991, p.27).

Meyer (2008) contends that at the surface level, L1 use can also help to reduce the anxiety of students in the classroom. According to Krashen's affective filter hypothesis, a student will filter or block out a TL if the environment becomes too stressful. Factors such as communication apprehension, fear of negative social evaluation and test anxiety, can all contribute to negative stress in the classroom. Use of the L1 in this case, can help to alleviate this anxiety.

Furthermore, Krashen's input hypothesis claims that language acquisition is optimal when it is comprehensible. This is often represented as i+1, where 'i' is the level of proficiency of the learners, and 1 is input just slightly beyond their current abilities. Ensuring that input in the classroom is optimally comprehensible is paramount to a learner's success, and can be regulated by use of the L1 (Meyer, 2008 and Nation, 2003).

Another argument supporting the use of the L1 in the classroom is current research surrounding the topic of how people learn. Research evidence suggests that the most optimal learning occurs when three conditions are met: "(a) engaging prior understandings, (b)

integrating factual knowledge with conceptual frameworks, and (c) taking active control over the learning process through metacognitive strategies" (Bransford, Brown, and Cocking, 2000; and Donovan and Bransford, 2005 in Cummins, 2008, p.67).

Seeing that prior knowledge is imperative to the learning process, the role of the L1 is particularly important in language teaching. Since L2 acquisition arises from prior experiences - which are likely to be encoded in the L1 - the teacher invariably needs to activate their existing knowledge of the L1 in order for teaching to be effective. However, as Cummins (2008) points out, "monolingual instructional approaches appear at variance with this fundamental principle of learning because they regard the students' L1 (and, by implication, the knowledge encoded therein) as an impediment to the learning of L2" (p.68). Avoidance of the L1 inevitably avoids prior understanding, as students are only be able to incorporate into their learning that which can already be expressed in the L2.

Finally, Cummins (1989) hypothesizes that an interdependence exists between the L1 and the L2:

> Having a strong foundation in the native language makes learning a second language both easier and faster…. Moreover, there is a general agreement that knowledge transfers readily from one language to another, so that students do not have to relearn in a second language what they have already learned in a first. In fact, it is clear that the ability to transfer to English what is learned in the native language applies … to skills in reading and writing – even when the orthographic system is quite different from the Roman alphabet (Cummins, 1989, in Artemeva, 1995, p. 125).

Cummins believes that despite surface differences between the L1 and the L2, "there is an underlying cognitive/academic proficiency that is common across all languages" (2008, p.68). Instead of viewing the L1 and L2 as separate, opposing forces, by teaching for transfer across languages teachers can use the L1 in a variety of ways.

Some Useful Applications for the L1 in the L2 Classroom

Using the L1 as a Method for Building Schema

One practical application of the L1, which takes the aforementioned claims into consideration, could be in the preparation for a meaning focused task in the classroom. Since accomplishing such a task already requires a great deal of mental focus, the L1 can be used in the preparation stages by the learner, to enhance the output delivered during its subsequent performance. In doing this, learners are able to intersect their imperfect knowledge of the TL with their experiential knowledge of the world, in order to push their language ability to a higher level (Nation, 2003).

Allowing a student to first explore ideas and invest meaning into a task in the L1, allows for a "gradual developmental process in which use of the L1 drops off naturally as it becomes less necessary" (Auerbach, 1993, p.20).

Using the L1 to Build Rapport

Tang (2002) asserts that by banning the use of the L1 in the classroom, the language is rendered as "second class" to the TL, causing psychological harm to the students (p.37). Being the most proficient in the TL, teachers who command the exclusive use of the L2 create a hierarchy of languages in which they are at the top. "If students are unfamiliar with a new approach, the teacher who cannot or will not give an explanation in the L1 may cause considerable student de-motivation" (Harbord, 1992, p.352). By allowing the use of the L1 this power dynamic can be alleviated and student motivation can be restored.

Using the L1 to Teach Grammar

Although for much of the twentieth century explicit grammar teaching has been frowned upon by the ESL and EFL community, the Focus on Form (FonF) approach has given new life to the role that grammar plays in second language acquisition. Rather than focusing on grammar at the onset and building the language around it, FonF gives attention to language items when they have naturally arisen through the presentation of content and through participation in language activities (Cook, 2001, p.414).

Cook asserts that this is a beneficial opportunity for L1 use, as "even advanced L2 users are less efficient at absorbing information from the L2 than from the L1" (Cook, 2001, p.414). Students are likely to already be familiar with grammar metalanguage in their L1, and by presenting grammar information in the L2, they must learn the new words for the metalanguage in the L2, as well as apply the learned structures to their speaking.

Using the L1 for Testing

Since language tests are usually exclusively conducted in the TL, students are being tested on the content of the tests, as well as their ability to comprehend the instructions. While this can be beneficial because it fully engages the learners' L2 abilities, "it may constrain the complexity of tests due to the limited language that can be used" (Cook, 2001, p.416).

Perhaps an alternative would be to include the L1 in instructions, as a method of ensuring that what the learners are being tested upon is the content of the test. Furthermore, this would alleviate the stress that many learners feel when they are being formally evaluated.

Since, as discussed above, the L1 and the L2 cannot be learned in absence of one another, conducting tests in this manner is more realistic. Cook describes a recent advanced-level Italian examination which takes this approach. In this examination, the students were asked to assume the roles of journalists, by summarizing the contents of two Italian newspaper articles in English for their editor to read. To succeed in tests such as this one, "students have to use both languages: they are tested on whether they can use the L2 effectively, not on how close their abilities are to those of monolingual native speakers" (Cook, 2001, p.417)

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Using the L1 as a method of expanding L2 Vocabulary

Central to the argument for or against L1 use in the classroom, is the effect that the L1 has on vocabulary acquisition. As mentioned above, languages which are similar, "often share a great deal of cognate vocabulary, and even where vocabulary is not cognate, there tend to be close translation equivalents" (Swan, 1997). By encouraging students to become aware of these similarities, teachers can help to develop autonomous learning strategies in their students. Likewise, when attention is given to the negative influence that L1 vocabulary can have on the L2, students can consciously develop strategies to overcome it.

For example, similarities between the L1 and L2 can be disadvantageous because lexicon that does not share an equivalent in the L1 is often avoided in the L2, creating stilted output and delayed acquisition (Swan, 1997). Furthermore, false cognates which are deceitfully similar in both languages but semantically different can cause difficulty for learners. Learning two related languages can also lead to spelling and reading difficulties. Two languages which share Roman script, for example, may require students to use characters which they are familiar with in an unfamiliar way (Meyer, 2008).

Although Ellis (2010) asserts that explicit learning cannot contribute to language proficiency, he does make a case for consciousness-raising activities. He contends that by explicitly raising the students' awareness of an aspect of language, teachers can facilitate the acquisition process. This occurs because the learners are able to store the explicit knowledge until they are developmentally ready to acquire it. Although they are unable to immediately acquire the language item through consciousness raising activities, it may occur with a delayed effect (Ellis, 2010, 171-172). Raising awareness of how L1 and L2 vocabulary are related can help to make students responsive to the "conceptual, sociolinguistic, and structural differences between the L1 and L2". (Meyer, 2008, p. 153) When students are selecting similar lexicon in the future, this practice will aid in finding the appropriate vocabulary to produce meaning.

As noted above, despite popular opinion, and while there are many different methods for conveying the meaning of a word, studies suggest that L1 translation is still the most effective method of learning vocabulary. This could be because translation is "clear, short, and familiar" (Nation, 2003, p. 4). Swan (1997), however, cautions that translating vocabulary is only effective when the term in question is used in its simplest form. The word 'read' for example, may be easy to translate when it is describing text, but translation may be less helpful in describing what it means to read between the lines, or read a person's mind. The L1's translation may be used differently grammatically, or may not have as many, or may have more uses than in the L2. All of these factors can impede learning when direct translation is used (Swan, 1997).

Furthermore, by translating lexicon directly from the L1, students are implicitly given the impression that this technique is always valuable. They may tend to extend this strategy to translate idioms or structures from their L1, or act on the assumption that their mother tongue is always relatable to the TL (Harbord, 1992).

To mitigate this tendency, teachers can aid their students in harnessing and strengthening their "innate sense of the limits of translation" (Swan, 1997). Research reveals that language learners have some intuitions about which features of their mother tongue have equivalence in the TL and which do not. This may be affected by the distance between the two languages, the nature of the language item in question, and the learning style of the student (Swan, 1997).

Perhaps the most effective method for using the L1 in translation is to first exhaust some strategies using the TL, such as "visual prompts, mime, and evoking situational context to create a need for the item in question (for eliciting), together with paraphrase, definition, and multiple exemplification" (Harbord, 1992, p. 354). Thereafter, translation can be effective as a method of checking comprehension (Harbord, 1992). This method maximizes input from the teacher, while also giving merit to the L1. This will aid students in drawing connections between their L1 and L2, and teach them how they can effectively use their mother tongue as a resource in their learning.

Using the L1 to Improve Writing

Numerous studies indicate that a high level of literacy in the L1 promotes a high level of acquisition in the L2 (Artemeva, 1995, p.125). When linguistic features are similar across languages, knowledge of these features can enhance a language student's learning. There are various skills which can be transferred from the L1 in writing, such as knowledge of writing conventions in the L1 (Artemeva, 1995).

Studies demonstrate that by asking students to write in a mixture of their L1 and their L2, then having them translate the entire text into the TL with the help of the teacher, the learner is able to learn writing strategies beyond their level of language proficiency. As a result of the

interaction with the L1, the learners are able to produce a meaningful text where they are able to fully express themselves (Auerbach, 1993, p.19). Similarly, the L1 could be used in the pre-writing and brainstorming stages, again with the intent to make the task at hand more meaningful to the students.

Other Uses for the L1

Atkinson (1987) asserts that the L1 can be effective in a variety of other teaching circumstances as well, such as eliciting language, checking comprehension, giving instruction at low levels, discussion of classroom methodology and checking for sense (when language produced in the TL is incomprehensible).

By employing the L1 in the classroom, Cook asserts that teachers can "produce students who are able to operate with two language systems as genuine L2 users, not as imitation natives" (2001, p. 419).

Of course, in many cases the students may not share the same L1, and the teacher may also be unable to communicate in the students' L1. In these situations, using the L1 may be less effective, or at any rate, teachers will need to be more creative in their application of the student's L1. Perhaps by pairing students who share a similar L1, having an assistant teacher who shares the students' L1, or by incorporating translation technology into the classroom, some of these hurtles could be overcome.

Dangers of Overuse

If teachers choose to use the L1 in the classroom, they must proceed with caution. It is important to bear in mind that in many cases language teachers are the sole source of input of the TL, and must aim to maximize their use of it as much as possible (Turnbull, 2001). When faced with the option to use the L1, teachers must first judge the value of its use, in comparison with the L2. While the use of the L1 may be beneficial, its implementation will always result in missed opportunities for input (Harbord, 1992).

Overuse of the L1 can have other potential dangers as well, as it can lead to dependency and avoidance of the TL. Students may feel that they are unable to learn a new term without translating it into their mother tongue, and in translating may tend to oversimplify it and misunderstand the finer nuances of its meaning. Moreover, students may form the habit of speaking to their teacher in their mother tongue, even if they are able to express their meaning in the TL as well. In group or pair work, students may do the same, failing to understand that during some activities it is imperative that only the TL is used (Atkinson, 1987).

Finally, when using the students' mother tongue in the classroom, there is the added risk that the teacher's mastery over the language in question is too insufficient to be used effectively (Atkinson, 1987). That said, even when the teacher's proficiency of the students' L1 is high, the classroom is not a place for a teacher to practice it.

Nation (2003) has proposed a variety of tactics which will allow teachers to maximize the use of the TL, while still using the students' L1. He contends that tasks should be chosen according their learners' proficiency level, making it possible to manage them in the L2. Learners can be prepared for tasks by pre-teaching vocabulary and through scaffolding, so that when the task is being completed they will not need to revert to the L1. By setting up "retelling

activities, strip stories, completion activities, and role plays" (p.6), L2 use can be made unavoidable because they need to use the TL to complete the task. Furthermore, by repeating tasks students become more comfortable using the L2 instead of the L1. Moreover, by making students aware of the goals of specific tasks, and the value of using the L2, they will be more apt to use it over the L1.

Conclusion

While it is not the intention of this paper to make a case for reverting back to the grammar-translation method, it does demonstrate that the L1 has merit in the language classroom. Despite the widespread popularity of the monolingual approach in language classrooms, there are many instances in the literature discrediting the assumptions which support it. Furthermore, a variety of theoretical arguments can be made which support the use of the L1 in the classroom.

Giving attention to the negative implications of the L1's overuse, it can be used as a means to facilitate clarity and aid in the fruitful understanding of the intrinsic relationship between the L1 and the L2. As the various classroom applications for the L1 which have been illustrated here demonstrate, the L1 can be used in a meaningful and communicative way. By combining the L1 with a communicative approach to language teaching, the L1 can infuse the TL input with meaningful experiential knowledge. Equipping learners with the ability to use their L1 productively towards L2 acquisition can have enormous potential for improvements in vocabulary learning, comprehension and production.

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