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Developing English Language Competence through Content and Language Integrated Learning Approaches: Teachers' Perceptions of the Teaching Practice at the Bilingual Christian University of Congo

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Abstract

Purpose: This study gives an authentic sense to the use of CLIL as teachers experience it at UCBC. The central goal of the study is to describe the experience of permanent, visiting, international and ESOL teachers about the use of CLIL techniques in the process of developing UCBC students' English competences. The study puts much focus on teachers' perceptions on their professional development experiences on CLIL pedagogy in their teaching career.

Methodology: The paradigm in which this study is situated is interpretivist and it used a qualitative study design. In fact, the study employed the descriptive approach to explore the perception of ESOL and content teachers regarding CLIL as a teaching technique at UCBC. Also, the descriptive approach helped in understanding how teachers are applying the CLIL technique and how they are adjusting themselves to the bilingual education practice.

Findings: The result of the study showed that (1) teachers did not view themselves as language teachers; they did not know how they could design language objectives in order to incorporate the language items in their English content courses, (2) teachers did not understand how bilingual education pedagogy worked. Many of them did not know academic English and those who did, did not use English to teach their content courses, (3) teachers were prepared for the use of CLIL Pedagogy, but they were reluctant to implement it, (4) UCBC had no accountability policy related to using English to teach content. No one held them accountable for their students' content learning or language development, (5) teachers did not own the CLIL pedagogy and thought the development of students' English is the work of the English art department alone.

Unique Contribution to Theory, Policy and Practice: The findings will put all the bilingual education stakeholders before their responsibility in the process of making UCBC a true and excellent bilingual academic institution. The authors recommended that UCBC content teachers be provided with a robust bilingual education training and a robust accountability policy. Also, department chairs should implement different decisions taken out of professional development sessions, and they should implement the bilingual education plan already put in place by the bilingual education coaches. Furthermore, UCBC bilingual education program should have strong and achievable outcomes/goals, and/or objectives for each department, and for each class including first undergraduate through fourth.

Keywords: *Content and Language Integrated Language (CLIL), Bilingual Education, Content Courses, English Medium Courses*

INTRODUCTION

The language of education in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) is French. The *Loi-Cadre* (2014) stipulates that national languages as well as local ones are used both as medium of instruction and as subjects. In addition, important foreign languages have been accredited as learning languages as well as subjects in order to smoothen economic, political and diplomatic relations with the rest of the world. Among the important foreign languages, the government of the DRC has adopted the English language to be taught as a subject and at the same time to be used as a medium of instruction for content courses.

English, in fact, is taught as a subject in some primary education in the DRC. It is also taught and learned as subjects in secondary and tertiary education. Moreover, English is used as a medium of instruction to facilitate some content courses in secondary as well as in higher education. In secondary school for example, Business English and Business Correspondence are English medium courses. In colleges and universities, however, there are a great deal of courses that use English as a medium of instruction (African Traditional Religion, Legal English, History of African Literature, etc.).

The Bilingual Christian University of Congo (UCBC) uses English and French as media of instruction for disciplinary courses in all the faculties, departments, and classes. Evaluation activities as well as the writing and the presentation of memoirs of finishing students are also done bilingually; that is, they are written and presented in French or in English.

Every year UCBC organizes an entrance test for fresh students. One component of this test is English. The office of bilingual affairs that is in charge of organizing the English test has noticed that 90% of the students score poorly. Students who enroll at UCBC have a low proficiency level in English and yet English is the medium of instruction used to teach content courses. These students have difficulties in expressing their ideas both orally and in writing. Moreover, they display difficulties in getting the gist from what their interlocutors are saying because their listening skills have not developed yet. There is a handful of research conducted by faculties and students from local Teacher Training colleges (TTC) (Oicha TTC, Beni TTC, Muhangi TTC, Masereka TTC) that reveal acute problems of English language mastery from our secondary school students. These researchers posit that methods, strategies, techniques, approaches and activities being used in different EFL/ESL classrooms do not favour English language acquisition and mastery from their students. When these students graduate from their secondary education and come to UCBC, they display a white gap in their English proficiency which is likely to handicap the acquisition of the content knowledge from their respective field of expertise.

This study was conducted at UCBC and south to provide answers to the threefold questions whose answers constituted the body of the study in one side and open the room for deeper understanding of the problem and the Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) techniques to the English language pedagogy which seems to be a new teaching approach in the other:

- How do ESOL (English to Speakers of Other Languages) and English-medium course teachers perceive CLIL as a technique to teach content and language at UCBC?
- How do ESOL and English medium course teachers perceive their professional development opportunities available to them?
- How do department deans and professional development providers perceive their roles regarding professional development of the teachers and what are their perspectives on the CLIL techniques?

This study gave an authentic sense to the use of CLIL as teachers experienced it at UCBC. The central goal of the study, in fact, was to describe the experience of permanent, visiting, international and ESOL teachers about the use of CLIL techniques in the process of developing UCBC students' English competences. In addition, the study put much focus on teachers' perceptions on their professional development experiences on CLIL pedagogy in their teaching career. Moreover, it explored how ESOL and English-medium course teachers adjusted themselves to the bilingual constraints whereby all teachers are language teachers (Dormer, 2019; Gottlieb, 2015) and all learners are language learners (Gottlieb, 2015).

LITERATURE REVIEW

CLIL: Meaning, Rationale and Theoretical Underpinning

Meaning

CLIL is a learning and a teaching approach in which a second or a foreign language is used to teach and learn content and language. According to Coyle, Marsh and Hood (2010), the teaching and learning process in the CLIL approach, the emphasis is not only put on content, and neither is it on language. In the language of Madrid & Sanchez (2001) CLIL is also known as CBLT (Content- Based Language Teaching) which is the integration of the content with language teaching aims. They said that CBLT involves the teaching of content and language in which students acquire content knowledge, perform different activities in the target language and improve their foreign/target language in a natural way. By doing this Madrid & Sanchez (2001) believed that students are killing two birds with one shot. Talking about CBLT, Lyster (2018) believed that it promoted the learning of contents and a second language simultaneously. Villalobos (2014) understood CLIL as CBI (Content-Based Instruction) and said, "CBI proposes an approach in which students acquire the target language through content." (72)

Rationale

In 1984, the European Parliament noticed weaknesses in language instruction, and quickly the Education Council thought there was a need to improve the teaching and learning of foreign languages (EP, 1984 as cited in Coyle, Marsh, and Hood, 2010). From 1990 CLIL was promoted as an effective approach to the teaching of foreign languages and it became prioritized all over the European Union as a great educational initiative (Eurydice, 2006 as cited in Coyle, Marsh, and

Hood, 2010) and in 2005 the European Council recommended that CLIL is adopted throughout the entire European Union (EC, 2005 as cited in Coyle, Marsh, and Hood, 2010). In 2006, a survey was conducted in order to learn where and how CLIL was being implemented in Europe. According to Eurydice (2006, as cited in Coyle, Marsh, and Hood, 2010) the survey revealed that there had been exponential uptake of CLIL across countries due to four simultaneous main proactive forces; first, families wanted their children to have some competence in at least one foreign language; second, governments wanted to improve languages education for socio-economic advantage; third, the European Commission wanted to lay the foundation for greater inclusion and economic strength; and fourth, at the educational level, language experts saw the potential of further integrating language education with that of other subjects.

What makes CLIL more practical and valuable is that we don't need much time devoted to the teaching of language, but this language is integrated in the content. In fact, language skills develop in a minimum of time while learning a curriculum subject. As the student is involved in the learning process, he/she develops his/her competence naturally the way a child develops his/her home language by focusing on the communication rather than on the form of that language. Research claims that a naturalistic learning process enhances learner motivation and positive attitude towards language learning.

Theoretical underpinning of CLIL

The theoretical framework underpinning CLIL seems to be very wide. In this article we discussed a few of them. The implementation of CLIL creates a naturalistic and semi- authentic environment (Paschalidou, 2018) where language is learned unconsciously. The acquisition-learning theory of Krashen (2013) stipulated that learning a language subconsciously yields a good result comparatively to conscious learning. Krashen called the subconscious learning ACQUISITION and the conscious learning LEARNING, and he argued that the better way to learn a language is through an acquisition approach. Another theory which CLIL is contingent to is the Comprehensible Input Hypothesis. Krashen (2013) argued that language is acquired when the input that is provided in the acquisition situation is just above ($i+1$) the learner level. Dale & Tanner (2012) claimed that the receptive skills are strengthened by the $i+1$ level of the input and the productive skills are concerned with the output (as cited in Paschalidou, 2018). The relevant theory that underlies the productive competences is Swain's Output Hypothesis. Swain (2000) posited that learning is intensified when the teacher and other classmates push the learner to produce. The learner's mental processes, thus, are intense which results in learning. In addition, Long (1996) believes that the integration of in and output; that is, the integration of the receptive and productive skills is supported by the Interaction Hypothesis. According to her (Long), when learners receive input, they decode it by using their abilities as well as the way they negotiate meaning with interlocutors. Thus, the conversation, the dialogue or the interaction that learners have fosters language acquisition.

Overview of CLIL Instruction in Africa

Planning the language of instruction in Africa has been a critical issue. In fact, the teaching techniques that have been used in most African countries are not effective in helping the learners develop competences in the target language. A great deal of African countries therefore have now started using CLIL with the objective of integrating both content and language development and not trying to separate them. Based on the assumption that the mastery of the language of instruction plays a significant role in the learning process (Omoto & Nyongesa, 2013), and that in most African countries learners often have low L2 ability and teachers are often not confident in the L2, Alidou and Brock-Utne (2006) revealed that there is evidence that levels of L2 ability for learning as well as for teaching are often too low to ensure that learners get an adequate education. Therefore, Clegg (2007) suggests that when teaching a subject in L2, there is a need to use a pedagogy that is different from the one used when teaching it as a subject.

Thus, the shift from the foreign language teaching techniques that were often used in most African countries to the content language integrated learning teaching techniques seems to bring effective solutions to the second or foreign language learning development process in most African countries, but it is not an easy process.

CLIL Pedagogy in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)

The DRC uses French as language of Education in all the levels of the national education system. In 2009, the government of the DRC issued a policy that national languages (Swahili, Lingala, Kikongo and Ciluba) should be used as languages of instruction in grades one through four (USAID, 2021) and French is taught as a subject (Jeff, 2019; USAID, 2021). Beginning in grades three and four, French should gradually be introduced as the language of instruction (USAID, 2021) and from the grade five, French becomes the language of instruction and national languages are taught as subjects (Jeff, 2019; USAID, 2021). Jeff (2019) reported that English is taught as a subject and the DRC government asked that English is taught in all the classes from the secondary to the tertiary education.

Research in the CLIL Pedagogy is very little in the DRC. This study is a contribution of the Congolese perception on Content and Language Integrated Learning (that uses English as medium of instruction) by examining the experience of the UCBC teachers. Musafiri & Katuka (2016) are among the first to carry out research on CLIL. In their research on instruction medium conducted at UCBC, they discovered that studying at a bilingual university is prestigious but students are hardly becoming bilinguals because the university's expectation is very high: teaching content courses in English and at the same time students develop their English language skills. In addition, content teachers do not teach their courses in English and leave the issue of developing students' English competences to the English teachers. Because content teachers do not teach their courses in English, this weakens English exposure to students and as a consequence students lose their motivation. Another research was conducted at Kinshasa University (the oldest university of the DRC) after a project whose aim was to address the challenge of chronic malnutrition in the country. In order to address the issue, there were three universities that collaborated to establish

the implementation of the Masters and Doctoral programs in nutritional epidemiology at the University of Kinshasa (UNIKIN) and English was adopted as the medium of instruction. Horwood, et al. (2021) revealed in the research that participants expressed mixed feelings about using English as a medium of instruction. On one hand, participants learned that English is the language of science that helps to achieve high quality research. In addition, participants got the opportunity to interact with the scientific community and get high-quality literature. Moreover, English advanced their careers as academics and researchers. Furthermore, as participants were exposed to English they got the opportunity to practice oral, written and reading skills. On the other hand, using English as the medium of instruction created a barrier to participation, lack of inclusivity and ownership of the program: students performed poor-quality work and supervisors were unable to determine whether the poor quality was due to poor language or poor quality of the work. Both Musafiri & Katuka (2016) and Horwood, et al. (2021) recommended that students are exposed to English to allow them to acquire both the content and the language items.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

The paradigm in which this study was situated was interpretivist and it used a qualitative study design. In fact, the study employed the descriptive approach (Creswell and Guetterman, 2019) to explore perception of ESOL and content teachers regarding CLIL as a teaching technique at UCBC. Also, the descriptive approach (Creswell and Guetterman, 2019) helped in understanding how teachers were applying the CLIL technique and how they were adjusting themselves to the bilingual education practice. Dormer (2019) argued that adjusting oneself to bilingual education practice was that all teachers become language teachers and all learners are language learners (Dormers, 2019; Gottlieb, 2015).

The methods we used to generate data include semi-structured and focus group interviews. Semi-structured interview helped to clarify a number of issues related to the use of CLIL as a pedagogy to develop students' language competence. In addition, the semi-structured interview allowed us to gather in-depth data (Creswell and Guetterman, 2019). Focus group interviews were used in this study in order to gain a great range of views (Hennink, Hutter & Bailey, 2012) related to the use of CLIL at UCBC. Also, the focus group was helpful as it allowed us to create an environment where our informants felt comfortable to express their thoughts, ideas and views (Hennink, Hutter & Bailey, 2012; Mackey & Gass, 2016; Creswell and Guetterman, 2019).

Selection of Participants and Ethical Consideration

The population of this study was twenty nine teachers in which seven were ESOL teachers, and the teachers of English medium courses (content teachers) were twenty- one. Among the content teachers, there were three visiting and two international teachers. The population of this study was purposely identified and the purposeful sampling technique we used was the concept sampling technique (Creswell and Guetterman, 2019) that helped us have a clear understanding of the teachers' perception about the CLIL use at UCBC.

During the research process, we observed ethical issues by seeking permission from faculty coordinators, teachers of English medium courses, ESOL, visiting and international teachers. In fact, the participants were given consent letters and were asked to sign them to show their willingness to participate in the study. We clearly told the participants that they were free to withdraw from the research (Creswell and Guetterman, 2019). In order to observe confidentiality and anonymity, participants were given pseudo names and codes to hide their identity.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The goal for this study was to describe the experience of permanent, visiting, international and ESOL teachers about the use of CLIL techniques in the process of developing UCBC students' English competences. In addition, our focus was to learn and understand teachers' perceptions on their professional development experiences on CLIL pedagogy in their teaching career and how they were adjusting themselves to the bilingual constraints that all teachers are language teachers.

Relevance of Using the CLIL Pedagogy at UCBC

UCBC teachers believed that CLIL Pedagogy was relevant at UCBC. First, it reflected the identity of UCBC as BILINGUAL university. Second, the use of CLIL helped UCBC students learn and develop their English language in meaningful contexts. Next, through CLIL; UCBC students gained more extensive and varied vocabulary and had enough opportunities to use English and thus develop their listening, speaking, reading and writing skills better than when English was taught as a subject. However, the instability of the curricula (English curriculum and content curriculum within different departments) hindered and handicapped the process for English language development. Adding to this, UCBC still had difficulties in scheduling courses through which students would develop, not only their content knowledge, but their English language. Some participants said, “...*faculty deans and secretaries rarely schedule courses to be taught in English. Some departments have discovered that they have to plan content courses which will be taught in English...*” This finding related to Ball, et al.(2023)'s research that revealed that bilingual education that used the CLIL model promoted classroom achievement increase through content learning. It resulted, thus, in bilingualism and biliteracy, heightened achievement across the curriculum, and raised the language performance of students. In the language of Dormer (2018) there should be a good academic curriculum that is leveled appropriately, cognitively and linguistically in which at least 50% of the instructional time must be in the target language, and at least 10% in the L1.

Students' Interest in the UCBC Bilingual Education Program and demonstrating understanding of the contents

UCBC teachers thought that students' interest in the bilingual program that UCBC offered was lower than 50%. They believed that some students regularly participated in optional English activities, organized their own English activities, did research in English and voluntarily interacted in English, but these activities ended up slowing down when students went up classes. It was

observed that beginning students had interest in English right when they entered the bilingual program, but they lost interest when they noticed that English could not be a barrier in their curriculum. One teacher who was involved in a focus group activity on bilingualism at UCBC reported “...*One student commented, ‘It seems that UCBC is a bilingual institution just by name. I am in L3 [3rd year] at a bilingual university, and yet no course has been taught in English so far ’* ” . Students’ interest in the bilingual program will also depend on whether they are able to understand the content they are taught through the medium of English or not. In addition, students’ interest will depend on the curriculum and scheduling put in place that foster students’ English language development in addition to their L1. As far as demonstrating understanding of the content is concerned, UCBC faculties believed that some students understood both the content and language and some others still had challenges and troubles. However, given that there were several features that could affect students’ understanding, it was relevant for teachers to have a good awareness of the second language level of learners, the context or nature of the course to help them use appropriate teaching approaches, and facilitate students' learning. These findings connect with Masafiri and Katuka (2016)’s research on instruction medium. They claimed that studying at a bilingual university is prestigious but students are hardly becoming bilinguals because the university’s expectation is very high: teaching content courses in English and at the same time students develop their English language skills. In addition, content teachers did not teach their courses in English and left the issue of developing students’ English competences to the English teachers. Moreover, because content teachers did not teach their courses in English, this weakened English exposure to students and as a consequence students lost their motivation and their interest. In their research, Horwood, et al. (2021) revealed that participants in their research expressed mixed feelings about using English as a medium of instruction. On one hand, participants learned that English is the language of science that helps to achieve high quality research. In addition, participants got the opportunity to interact with the scientific community and get high-quality literature. Moreover, English advanced their careers as academics and researchers. Furthermore, as participants were exposed to English, they got the opportunity to practice oral, written and reading skills. On the other hand, using English as the medium of instruction created a barrier to participation, lack of inclusivity and ownership of the program: students performed poor-quality work and supervisors were unable to determine whether the poor quality was due to poor language or poor quality of the work. Both Musafiri & Katuka (2016) and Horwood, et al. (2021) recommended that students be exposed to English to allow them to acquire both the content and the language items, and thus build their interest in English as a medium of instruction.

Teacher’s Preparation for Using English as Medium of Instruction and Implement Practice Bilingual Education as a Pedagogy.

Research participants said that UCBC teachers are prepared because the leadership of UCBC has always been intentional in establishing a culture supporting English as Medium of Instruction. For example, most of the books in the library are in English, the Advanced Study program is intentional in sending beneficiaries to English speaking countries with the aim that they

start teaching in English when they come back from studies. Additionally, most professional development sessions always focus on using English as a medium of instruction in order to develop students' bilingualism. Nevertheless, there are some aspects like lack of motivation, unreadiness to align oneself to the vision and mission of UCBC, lack of decision implementation, and frequent changes of the program that are hindering the bilingual education practice at UCBC. Also, Research participants said that they sometimes incorporate language objectives in their content courses. However, it is often a hard task given it is not always clear what language objectives should be and what language objectives are feasible due to a lack of clear language objectives for the entire program at UCBC. Participant said: *"I try to incorporate English in my teaching, but it is typically impromptu and not strategic". We are convinced that English learning has to take place in content courses, but don't know what language item to incorporate.* As far as teachers' preparation to use English as medium of instruction and implement the practice of bilingual education pedagogy, literature concludes that teaching English through content is very much challenging. A good EMI instructor must be able to help students develop their content knowledge as well as helping them improve their language level (Strotmann, B. et al., 2014) Dormer (2019) argues that adjusting oneself to bilingual education practice is that all teachers become language teachers and all learners are language learners (Dormers, 2019; Gottlieb, 2015). Marsh, Mehisto, Wolff, and Martin (2010) proposed that "teachers undertaking CLIL will need to be prepared to develop multiple types of expertise: among others, in the content subject; in a language; in best practice in teaching and learning; in the integration of the previous three; and, in the integration of CLIL within an educational institution" (p.5). Coyle, Hood and Marsh (2010) bring in what they call the *Language triptych* in bilingual education, and claim that it helps teachers sequence language and content objectives in their lessons. The *language triptych*, according to them, are presented in the following lines:

Language of learning: At this level of the language triptych, the teacher needs to reflect on language items that help students grab some fundamentals concepts and skills that relate to the subject.

Language for learning: At this second level of the language triptych, the teacher has to design the kind of language that is needed to work in a foreign language environment. Students, in fact, need strategies to follow in order to use the foreign language effectively.

Language through learning: This level of the language triptych should help the teacher make sure that active involvement of language and thinking is necessary for effective learning.

In the language of Hamayan, Genesee, and Cloud (2013) teachers should adjust their use of language, their instructional activities, and the materials they use in ways that ensure students acquire academic content even though they are learning through their L2.

Are teachers and Department Chairs sure of what they are supposed to do to help students develop their English through content?

Research participants said that most teachers and department chairs were not sure of what they were supposed to do to develop learner's bilingualism. Participants said: "...*English is not an urgent need... Department chairs have not the responsibility to develop it*". "... *our department is not applying bilingual education at all,..... and we have a lot of work to do. Students have fear when it comes to using English, and they seem not to be willing.*" This finding connected with Pr. Jan Dormer's report about her observation on bilingual education at UCBC. Dormer (2022) observed that professors were not improving their own English, and a great deal of them including some department chairs did not know academic English. Also, teachers who were supposed to teach in English are not tested on their English proficiency; a doubt on the mastery of French was also sending an alarm. Moreover, Dormer (2022) reported that "Despite numerous professional development opportunities emphasizing that all teachers are language teachers, some teachers still do not embrace their role as language teachers... visiting content teachers are not bilingual...lack of accountability of professors. No one holds them accountable for their students' content learning or language development. No view that bilingual education is a responsibility shared by all professors". According to Met (1999), CLIL teachers should display competences in content knowledge, content pedagogy, understanding of language acquisition, language pedagogy, knowledge of materials development and selection, and understanding of student assessment (As cited in Strotmann, B. et al., 2014). In addition to these, a content teacher should develop skills in how to design content and language objectives (Dormer, 2018) and should display the professional skills as communicative competence (skill in using English), linguistic knowledge (understanding the rules of English), theoretical knowledge (understanding English- language learning), methodological competence (skill in English teaching), and bilingual education competence (skill in integrating content and language).

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

This study analyzed teachers' perception on the use of CLIL practice for the development of students' English language competence at UCBC. Our focus was to learn and understand teachers' perception on their professional development experiences on CLIL pedagogy in their teaching career and how they are adjusting themselves to the bilingual constraints that all teachers are language teachers.

Most teachers perceived CLIL as relevant at UCBC because students identified themselves as bilinguals, and this helped them learn and develop their English language in meaningful contexts. In addition, some students were interested in the program but teachers and department chairs still faced challenges and troubles in a few of things; first, teachers did not view themselves as language teachers; they did not know how they could design language objectives in order to incorporate the language item in their English content courses. Second, teachers did not understand how bilingual education pedagogy worked. Many of them did not know academic English and those who know did not use English to teach their content courses. Third, teachers were prepared for the use of CLIL Pedagogy, but they were reluctant to implement it. Fourth, UCBC had no

accountability policy related to using English to teach content. No one held teachers accountable for their students' content learning or language development. Fifth, teachers did not own CLIL pedagogy and thought the development of students' English was the work of the English art department alone.

Owing to the importance of CLIL pedagogy at UCBC, we suggest the following: 1) UCBC professors should be provided with robust education, and a robust accountability policy (Dormer, 2022), 2) UCBC professors should be equipped with skills on developing language and content for specific language proficiency levels within a specific content area (Dormer, 2022), 3) Department deans should implement different decisions taken from professional development sessions including the UCBC Bilingual Education Plan, 4) UCBC teachers should improve their academic English and they should reach the CALP (Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency) level in order to encourage their students to use English, 5) UCBC professors should be provided with competencies in designing student-centered learning tasks for content learning and language, 6) UCBC bilingual education program should have strong and achievable outcomes/goals, and/or objectives for each department, and for each class including first undergraduate through fourth undergraduate and they should design a dashboard for assessing the English language outcomes.

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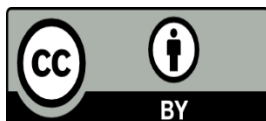
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