

Teachers' attitudes about students' self-assessment: what research says and what classrooms reveal.

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Abstract: The assessment reform in Algeria is still in its embryonic stage despite the wide use of self-assessment in EFL classrooms. Little empirical research is done on how to integrate formative assessment in Higher Education. The purpose of this study is to contribute to the development of students' self-assessment by addressing the gap found in teachers' current assessment practices. Specifically, this paper explores teachers' classroom assessment practices in the English department of Bejaia University, Algeria and their attitudes and beliefs about students' self-assessment in academic writing. The study involved fourteen Algerian teachers of EFL writing who developed writing logs in which issues related to their attitudes and experiences about assessment in general and self-assessment in particular were addressed. Results permitted to frame self-assessment from teachers' perspective and identify a range of factors responsible for the development of this process in EFL classrooms. In an attempt to facilitate the integration of self-assessment into EFL writing instruction and reinforce the assessment reform, we suggested a number of implications.

Key Words: Classroom practice, EFL writing, Formative Assessment, students' self-assessment, teachers' attitudes.

مواقف الأساتذة من التّقييم الذاتي للطلاب:

ما يهليه البحث النظري وما تكشفه الأقسام الدراسية

الملخص بالعربية: لم ينل موضوع التّقييم في المنظومة التّعليمية في الجزائر حظه من الإصلاحات، وهذا رغم التطبيق الواسع للتّقييم الذاتي في صفوف اللغة الانجليزية كلفة أجنبية. كما تقلّ الأبحاث التي تناولت كيفية تطبيق أنماط التّقييم البنائي في التّعليم العالي، إذ لم نسجّل إلا عددا ضئيلا. وتعدّ هذه الدّراسة مساهمة من أجل تطوير التّقييم الذاتي للطلاب من خلال معالجة الفجوات المتوقعة في أنماط التّقييم الحالية للأساتذة. وعليه تبحث الدّراسة في آليات الممارسة التّقييمية للأساتذة في صفوف قسم اللغة الإنجليزية بجامعة بجاية (الجزائر) ومواقفهم، كما تقف عند آرائهم (أي آراء الأساتذة) حول التّقييم الذاتي للطلاب في عملية الكتابة الأكاديمية.

تكونت عينة البحث من أربعة عشر أستاذًا للغة الإنجليزية قاموا بتسجيل مذكرات تناولوا فيها مسائل تتعلق بمواقفهم وخبراتهم في التّقييم بشكل عام والتّقييم الذاتي بشكل خاص. وسمحت النتائج بالتعرف على مختلف آراء الأساتذة في التّقييم الذاتي، وكذا تحديد أهم العوامل المسؤولة عن تطوير هذه العملية في صفوف تعليم اللغة الانجليزية كلفة أجنبية. وكمحاوله لتيسير عملية إدماج التّقييم الذاتي في تعليم الكتابة باللغة الإنجليزية وتعزيز إصلاح التّقييم، قدمنا مجموعة من اقتراحات.

الكلمات المفتاحية: العملية التعليمية، الكتابة باللغة الانجليزية كلفة أجنبية، التّقييم البنائي، التّقييم الذاتي للطلاب، مواقف الأساتذة

Introduction: Algerian Universities adopted a new educational system, the licence/master/doctorate (LMD), that has the goal of forming students to take full responsibility in enriching their knowledge and building their competencies. This new reform aims at fostering students' sense of responsibility and autonomy and developing their critical thinking potential. One way to achieve these aims is to engage learners in the learning process and encourage ongoing evaluation. Apart from the traditional examinations,

assessment is seen as a key to achieve students' autonomy and enhance their self-regulated capacities. That is, the need to monitor their progress by assessing their performance by themselves to know where they are in terms of their learning and to identify areas that need further work lies at the heart of the reform. There is ample evidence that self-assessment is beneficial for students, but it is obvious that theoretical considerations may differ greatly from actual classroom practices in the Algerian classroom. The development of assessment practices depends on many factors among which attitudes and beliefs play a prominent role (Borg, 2003; Brown, 2004; Bullock, 2011). Based on this, there is an urge to explore teachers' practices and beliefs in EFL classrooms to frame self-assessment from their perspective. Yet, to do this, one should underpin these practices in theoretical principles of self-assessment with an urgent need of adaptation to the Algerian contexts of education.

We should note, however, that as far as self-assessment is concerned, there is relatively limited body of research relating to teachers' attitudes about self-assessment in the Algerian context. Thus, it is very essential to find out about what surrounds higher education in Algeria and evaluate the extent to which the LMD reform meets its objectives. The present case study aims to address this issue by investigating the relationship between teachers' beliefs at the English department of Bejaia University-Algeria and their current assessment practices. We seek to explore teachers' attitudes towards self-assessment to better understand how this concept is approached in the Algerian university milieu then match these attitudes in order to help teachers integrate self-assessment into their instructional plans to promote

autonomy and self-regulation which are the keystones of the reform. To this end, we think it worth basing our research on the following questions:

1. What types of assessment are used in EFL writing classrooms in Bejaia University?
2. How do teachers at Bejaia University conceive self-assessment?
3. What benefits and challenges do teachers see in the integration of self-assessment into their EFL writing classes?
4. How can self-assessment be integrated into EFL writing classrooms?

Literature Review

1- Classroom Assessment: Definition and Related Concepts

Evaluation and assessment are terms that are widely used in EFL education, yet they may still be misconceptualised. Evaluation is a broad term including a wide range of implementations and purposes. It refers generally to the process of making judgments on the value of the educational processes, either qualitatively or quantitatively, for the sake of decision making (Russell & Airasian, 2012, p. 11). As for assessment, it refers to a systematic collection and interpretation of information about students' performance and learning progress; it can be summative or formative. Summative assessment, that entails grades, refers to testing which involves measuring students' performance at the end of a course or programme for qualification purposes (Andrade & Cizek; 2010). As regards formative assessment, it is a systematic process that includes a full range of procedures used to gain information on students' progress to shape and improve their competence (Miller, Linn & Gronlund, 2009).

Said differently, the purpose of evaluation is judging results for learning certification and enhancement of programs, whereas assessment, which involves teachers, individual students or peers, aims at collecting information to improve instruction and support students' learning. Nevertheless, it is useful to think of these concepts as connected processes.

With regard to self-assessment, this process is based on students' reflection and identification of their strengths and weaknesses. It is generally defined as *"... the process of reflecting on one's performance and revising or redirecting it in order to improve it..."* (Pierce, 1999, p. 129). The question that arises, however, is whether students are really capable of assessing their own performance or progress alone? In this concern, Gardner writes: *"It should be clear that self-assessment is not about leaving students to fend for themselves. It is about teachers creating opportunities for students to make responsible choices which individualize assessments to their own needs."* (2000, p. 55). Self-assessment is therefore defined as an ongoing collaborative process that involves both the student and the teacher in collecting information about student's progress in the language (Hancock, 1994, p. 3). It should be noted that teacher's knowledge, skills and expertise are highly crucial in this context.

2-The Rationale for Rethinking Students' Self-assessment in Higher Education

According to Andrade and Valtheva (2009), self-assessment supports the process of learning by providing opportunities to take initiative and improve students' learning in the fields of personal abilities and skills, cognitive development and learning achievement. To support this claim, Harris and McCann (1994, p. 64) highlight the difference between assessment and self-

assessment by claiming that the results from teacher assessment provide more feedback into a course content, whereas those from learners' self-assessment have a direct effect on the learning process. Self-assessment has positive effects not only on learning but also on teaching. From a pedagogical perspective, self-assessment can serve as the basis for teacher reflections on their instructional plans and provide information that helps them to identify their students' needs and gaps. By so doing, they can respond more effectively to those needs and plan for more advanced work (Salkind, 2008, p. 61).

One of the main arguments supporting self-assessment is, according to Gardner (2000) ,the promotion of students' autonomy and a sense of responsibility which are developed through students' constant review of their own progress. In this process, students are encouraged to reflect upon their learning and to identify discrepancies between current and desired outcomes. Thus, metacognitive skills such as awareness and reflection can be developed (Harris, 1997; Russel & Airasian, 2012). In this respect, Vygotsky (1962) argues: *"When teachers allow their students to self-monitor, they foster their understanding and management of cognitive processes, and also help them develop knowledge through conscious control over that knowledge or develop metacognitive awareness of knowledge and thought."* (as cited in Muñoz and Alvarez, 2007, p. 6)When judging their progress, students develop a deeper understanding of what they are doing and what they are expected to achieve. As a result, feeling empowered and confident, students build a positive self-image and increase their motivation and willingness to engage in similar activities (Blue, 1994; Elliott& Higgins, 2005; Alonso-Tapia & Panadero, 2010).

Another key justification to integrate self-assessment into EFL instruction lies in its potential to promote self-regulation among students (Brown & Harris, 2014; Andrade & Brookhart, 2016). This ongoing process supports learning by providing students with opportunities to exert control over their learning, regulate and manage their progress.

Taking into account the positive outcomes of self-assessment, we can conclude that it represents a powerful learning tool that has considerable impacts on both learning and teaching.

3-Students' Self-assessment: an Emphasis on Teacher's Role

Teachers have three main roles in self-assessment: raising awareness, providing guidance and positive feedback (Gardner, 2000, p. 56). In their article, Muñoz and Alvarez (2007, p. 18) explain these roles. First, teachers' primary role is to promote students' understanding of the importance and benefits of self-assessment and develop their awareness of their role in this process. Second, teachers should provide them with constant guidance and assistance on how to assess their performance. The last task for teachers is to provide students with feedback and help them understand the meaning of the assessment results. This has the aim of ensuring objectivity in students' judgments and decisions.

It is worth mentioning, however, that teachers' practices are underpinned in their conceptualisation of educational processes (teaching, learning and assessment) and in their roles in these processes. Teachers' attitudes result from a complex combination of beliefs, values, behaviours and motivations towards a particular subject or concept (Pickens, 2005). Therefore, what teachers believe about teaching and learning makes a difference to the

pedagogical strategies they adopt in their classrooms and this is also the case for aspects related to assessment practices. Brown (2004, p. 303) highlights that all pedagogical acts are affected by teachers' attitudes about education. Indeed, these conceptualisations "are closely linked to one's choice" of assessment techniques (Asch, 1976, as cited in brown, 2004, p. 303). This is the reason behind our belief that it is of major significance to make teachers' attitudes explicit and visible.

Actually, empirical research shows inconsistent findings about the relationship between teachers' beliefs and their classroom practices. On the one hand, there exist teachers who regard self-assessment as beneficial for students' performance and therefore believe that students should take part in this process (Tshabalala & Ndimande, 2016). On the other hand, some teachers still think of assessment as strictly the teacher's mere responsibility (Sadler, 1989; Gardner, 2000). For these teachers, the idea of engaging students in the assessment process may be threatening (Sadler, 1989). In this context, Stefani (1998) argues: "*Too many teachers believe that a grade, a comment, or a word of praise or blame are enough, when in actual fact students want information specifically linked to their performance and guidance on what they should do to improve.*" (as cited in Oscarsson, 2009, p. 81). Therefore, these teachers still rely on traditional forms of assessment. But we note as well that teachers' beliefs do not always match with their current assessment practices (Yang, 2008; Bullock, 2011; SzÖcs, 2015).

Methodology

1-Participants

This investigation was carried out in the University of Bejaia, Algeria. We contacted all EFL teachers at the department of English, but only fourteen of them have experience in teaching EFL writing. We numbered twelve (12) female teachers and only two (02) male teachers. Concerning their teaching experience at the department, it varies from 5 to 30 years in teaching EFL and from 1 to 6 years in teaching the course of academic writing. The participants hold different degrees (B.A., M.A. or doctoral) in English.

2-Method and Procedures

The main objective of this research is to investigate the Algerian university teachers' beliefs about self-assessment. We specifically aim at understanding and getting insight into teachers' viewpoints, motives and experiences with regard to Algerian EFL classroom conditions and influences. To achieve such a goal, we opted for a qualitative approach. Our choice of data collection tool falls upon the use of teachers' writing logs. This choice is motivated by the high degree of freedom it provides for respondents and the absence of bias and manipulation of answers. Besides, writing logs allow researchers to collect rich data directly from the participants and get into their personal attitudes and experiences over a span of time (Friesner & Hart, 2005, p. 120). Teachers at the University of Bejaia are asked to develop their writing logs in which issues related to their viewpoints and experiences about assessment in general and self-assessment in particular were addressed. Specifically, the participants are solicited to provide all details about the assessment practices they adopt when assessing their students in EFL writing classrooms, their attitudes towards self-assessment and the benefits they grasp as well as the challenges they meet along this process. To accomplish the task, they are provided with a frame of reference related to (1)

their conception of classroom assessment, (2) the type of assessment they use with their students, (3) students' weaknesses in academic writing, (4) their attitudes towards self-assessment of academic writing and (5) their suggestions to promote self-assessment in EFL writing.

This has allowed us to understand and frame self-assessment from teachers' standpoint. Data collection started in June 2016 and took five months to gather all the writing logs. Data is then analysed and interpreted qualitatively in relation to our research questions. Specifically, content analysis is the most suitable approach to the qualitative analysis.

Results

Based on teachers' reported answers, data is grouped under two thematic headings: classroom practice and personal conceptions that form the basis of their attitudes. Classroom practice concerns teachers' actions in EFL writing classrooms and conceptions refer to their beliefs about assessment in general and self-assessment in particular.

A. Classroom Practice

The analysis of the written logs revealed that the most common type of classroom assessment used in EFL writing in the department of English in Bejaia is teacher assessment. All teachers assess their students' performance themselves. The following comments will serve to illustrate this:

Teacher 1: *"I do not use portfolios, journals, self assessment, and peer assessment. I prefer to respond directly by writing comments (global) and (local) on students' drafts or final written products."*

Teacher 2: *"I used to assess my students personally."*

In addition to teacher assessment, few teachers also reported using peer assessment. They explained that students sometimes comment on their peers' written productions. Only one teacher among all the teachers stated that self-assessment was part of her daily classroom practice when she taught academic writing.

Regarding the assessment techniques, the participants did not provide much information concerning the assessment procedures as no reference was made to any particular assessment techniques or tasks. Only two teachers mentioned testing and two others cited formative feedback but without further clarification. This implies that the teachers might not have a comprehensive and solid knowledge about the characteristics and use of assessment techniques.

Another important finding concerns assessment criteria. The respondents were able to discuss a range of aspects they focused most frequently on when assessing their students' writing. Although the responses were mixed, certain common criteria could be established according to two categories: form and content. The teachers explained that form comprises grammar, vocabulary, mechanics and spelling; and content involves unity, coherence and cohesion, organisation of ideas, paragraph structure, evidence and style.

According to all the teachers' answers, form turned out to be more frequently the subject of assessment. This may stem from their belief that grammar and vocabulary are the most important elements in writing. This is perceptible in the responses provided by some teachers. One of them wrote: *"language, language, language and content."* Another teacher stated: *"the mistakes made reveal big flaws"* This describes a product-approach to writing instruction since only one teacher stressed the importance of authenticity

and originality as a criteria of assessment. We can notice here that in spite of the recommendations of educators in second language teaching to focus on developing learners' communicative competence, it seems that EFL writing, in Bejaia university, is still traditionally taught and assessed.

A pertinent subject of investigation among researchers is the issue of errors in second language writing and their sources. It is worth mentioning that Bejaia university teachers pinpointed many shortcomings related to students' writing competence. They particularly specified the most common difficulties the students are confronted with. Difficulties related to the writing product include: grammar, restricted vocabulary, cohesion and coherence breaks, general topic sentences, unstructured paragraphs and poor arguments. Regarding the process, the teachers reported students' low level of motivation and self-confidence and fear of errors. Basically, the participants explained that when writing academically, students face problems in both the product and the process of writing. As a result, students' low achievement in writing is likely to hinder the implementation of self-assessment in the classroom. Based on In other words, students are unable to identify their weaknesses in EFL writing due to their very limited linguistic competence.

Students' difficulties in writing can be attributed to many factors, but the majority of teachers tend to shirk responsibility. The first cause evoked by teachers is the students' lack of autonomy. The vast majority of teachers claimed that students are not autonomous and do not take responsibility to develop their competence. This represents a real impediment to a student-centered classroom. Another cause listed is a lack of reading in English. To illustrate, one teacher pointed out: *"we cannot expect learners to perform*

well in writing if their reading abilities are weak. The more they read in the target language, the better their writing performance". Another one stated: *"they are not aware that there is no writing without reading."*

Some teachers also mentioned a lack of practice associated with a lack of motivation and interest towards this skill. For instance, one teacher stated: *"They don't like writing paragraphs/essays (not motivated)".* Another one indicated: *"Most of them [students] often tell the[y] will never be good a[t] writing. It's a real Handicap."* Another important factor highlighted by many teachers is language interference which could be considered a serious hindrance towards the development of students' writing competence. The teachers further explained that students think in Arabic or French and try to translate into English, so they fail to communicate their thoughts in English effectively.

Yet, it is worth considering that only a couple of teachers linked students' low competence in writing to instructional deficits at early stages. One teacher reported: *"they [students] lack training in the different steps needed to write a paragraph/essay."* Another one highlighted *"Faulty teaching at early stages"* to be one of the causes of students' low achievement due also, according to another participant, to a lack of attendance in EFL classrooms in Bejaia University where students can take decision to attend lectures or miss them without justifying their absences. This problem of free enrolment resulted in absenteeism, less practice and less teaching hours. These two teachers further claimed that students do not get enough constructive feedback on their performance and they receive little attention, so they keep making the same mistakes.

B. Conceptions

It is clear from teachers' classroom practice that students are not engaged in the assessment process. To understand the principles underlying these practices, there is a need to get deeply into their beliefs. One important condition in assessment is how teachers regard this process.

According to teachers' responses, assessment of writing is viewed as a formative process that aims at determining students' progress and improving their performance. Most teachers expressed their beliefs in students' capacity to assess their own progress and they seemed to place high value on students' self-assessment. For instance, one teacher reported: "*with a continuous practice, they eventually manage to correct their mistakes*". Another teacher noted: "*They are certainly capable to do it but I think they should be trained.*"

It is worth mentioning, however, this belief is not shared by two teachers who have doubts about their students' ability to self-assess their own written productions. One of them stated particularly: "*they are not capable [of assessing their works] as they assess subjectively their productions.*" The other claimed: "*I prefer to assess my students' papers; I do not trust my students.*"

As far as attitudes about the process itself are concerned, all the participants recognised that self-assessment is beneficial for students, even though as stated previously, teachers failed to integrate into their instruction. Surprisingly, no reference was made to self-assessment effects on teaching. This may imply that the teachers actually have little knowledge about this process.

In an attempt to link teachers' attitudes to their classroom practice, we have noted that although all the teachers professed to value self-assessment, they admitted that students are not provided with opportunities to do so in the classroom. The following comments support this claim:

Teacher 1: *"I think that due to time constraints, students are not stimulated by their teachers to do that."*

Teacher 2: *"I do not ask them to evaluate their production by themselves."*

Teacher 3: *"I personally tried out peer assessment but not self-assessment."*

This reinforces our claim that self-assessment is not implemented in EFL writing classrooms in Bejaia University. This is not surprising when the conditions that are necessary to ensure its success are not present. Most of the teachers voiced certain concerns regarding the implementation of self-assessment. They believe that integrating self-assessment into EFL writing classes is highly challenging. The major restrictions on self-assessment as highlighted by these teachers are cited as follows:

- (1) Self-assessment challenges related to students: subjectivity and denial of errors, feelings of praise, procrastination, lack of motivation and autonomy, limited linguistic competence and threats of validity and reliability.

- (2) Self-assessment challenges related to teachers: exclusion of the teacher, lack of opportunities, preference towards traditional assessment methods and absence of supervision and guidance.

- (3) Self-assessment challenges related to the educational context: no training on assessment, time constraints, absence of a curriculum framework and heavy workload.

Self-assessment is mainly associated with difficulties related to time constraints, lack of training, lack of autonomy and a restricted learning context. The arguments provided above can justify why teachers at Bejaia University are still relying solely on teacher assessment.

Discussion

The present study adds to our understanding of the effects of teachers' attitudes and experiences on classroom assessment. Based on our findings, there appeared to be a lack of alignment between the beliefs and current practices of teachers at the University of Bejaia. These findings are compatible with those of previous studies conducted in other countries (for example: Bullock, 2011 (Ukraine) and SzÖcs, 2015(Hungary)). In spite of their positive attitudes about student's self-assessment, teachers admitted they do not engage their students in this process. Results presented in section A (**classroom practice**) confirm that self-assessment is not integrated into EFL writing instruction; teacher assessment is the dominant mode of assessment. These results are similar to those found by Benettayeb-Ouahiani in her small scale study conducted at the department of English at the University of Chlef (Algeria) in 2016. Besides, grammar and vocabulary turned out to be more frequently the subjects of assessment. This implies that writing is still traditionally assessed in Bejaia.

These results point out that the assessment reform in higher education should be reconsidered. Policy holders and teachers should devote more time

and efforts to enhance their assessment practices. They need to opt for alternative methods of assessments to encourage reflection and autonomy and promote self-regulation in academic writing.

Section B (**conceptions**) provides insight into teachers' beliefs about classroom assessment. Participants reported positive attitudes towards student's self-assessment and recognised that this process has significant pedagogical effects on different aspects of students' writing mainly metacognition, motivation and self-regulation. These benefits have widely been reported in other studies conducted abroad (Harris, 1997; Elliott & Higgins; 2005; Asadoorian & batty, 2005; as cited in El-koumy, 2010; Bullock, 2011; Panadero & Alonso-Tapia, 2013). These findings represent an incentive that encourages the integration of self-assessment into EFL writing instruction to foster the development of students' writing competence.

Nevertheless, the intervention of multiple factors, notably students' problems in writing, lack of autonomy, time constraints, lack of training and the restricted educational context resulted in teachers' little use of classroom assessment tasks and techniques. As a result, students do not take part in the assessment process. This is consistent with what other researchers showed in their investigations about self-assessment in foreign countries (Brown, 2004; Bullock, 2011; Nikolovska, 2015). Teachers' experiences and practices hint that making self-assessment part of EFL writing course would be challenging and these impediments can be considered the reasons why they still rely on traditional assessment methods and cannot shift to alternative assessment practices.

The participants suggested that engaging students in the assessment process requires teachers to consider the different aspects related to

classroom atmosphere and students' learning in addition to collaboration between the teachers and the students. To cope with these challenges, they thought out of some suggestions to help integrate self-assessment into EFL writing classrooms: these are: to combine different assessment methods, to promote experiential learning, to train both teachers and students on self-assessment, to integrate portfolios and diaries, to collaborate with students, to provide feedback, to devote more time for the EFL writing course, to develop students' motivation, to reward them on their performance and to encourage them.

From the teachers' perspective, the implementation of self-assessment requires a radical change in the teaching of writing and a collaboration between the faculty, students and administration. Self-assessment is a complex process that involves all the institution members.

Conclusion

Throughout the present investigation, we have reached some findings. Teachers' at the English department at the University of Bejaia expressed their positive attitudes towards students' self-assessment of their own writing performance, yet these teachers pointed out that it is a challenging process. Accordingly, we are likely to ask: what can we do to eliminate the impeding variables and reinforce the positive beliefs of teachers? Based on the results of this study and the existing research, we highly express the need to engage students in self-assessment by focusing on its potential advantages rather than on the problems inherent to this complex process. Therefore, we suggest some pedagogical directions through which we encourage teachers to:

- Integrate self-assessment into EFL writing instruction,
- Raise students' awareness on its value and familiarise them with this process. Students should understand the purposes and principles underlying self-assessment; they also need to be taught how to self-assess their performance,
- Undertake professional development trainings in order to understand the characteristics of self-assessment and be trained on its use,
- Discuss assessment criteria with students,
- Use models of self-assessment,
- Develop different techniques like portfolios, checklists and rubrics,
- Provide opportunities for practice in the classroom,
- Provide constant feedback and opportunities for reflection and revision.

To conclude, it is of paramount importance to point out that some limitations may affect this study in terms of conceptual and methodological aspects. By the conceptual limitations, we refer to the fact that self-assessment is a personal process that can be envisioned from different points of view. This can be explained by a limited body of both theoretical and empirical research available on teachers' attitudes about self-assessment in Algeria. The methodological limitations can be explained by the limited number of participants and the use of one research method only. This makes it difficult to generalise our findings. To cope with these limitations, replications of the same study using various research methods, such as interviews and observations, can further validate our findings. Moreover, replication of the same study by extending the sample to include teachers

from different educational settings throughout Algeria is encouraged to compare the results and examine their generalisation. Further research is also needed on students' attitudes towards this process and the role of the educational context in promoting self-assessment.

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