

5 Being a Student on the BA in Educational Studies (TESOL): Six Graduates' Perspectives

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1 INTRODUCTION

John Atkins

Being a student on the BA led to some kind of personal change in every participant. As a teacher, each gained academic knowledge about TESOL, improved their English and enhanced their teaching skills. Each developed organizational and time management abilities, self-confidence, critical thinking and research skills. In many cases this knowledge and skill renewed participants' commitment to teaching and to their learners and genuinely re-invigorated their careers as they carried their greater confidence and enthusiasm into their classrooms (Freeman, 2007). In this chapter, six graduates reflect on what they gained most from the BA. Each emphasizes different features of the programme and different gains while making the BA relevant to their own purposes. It is interesting that while particular modules were significant learning experiences for each graduate, they were not necessarily the same modules.

Moza Al-Shukaili considers how the BA course has enhanced her professional development as a teacher. For her, it has provided a rich source of knowledge, helped her to update her teaching skills and strategies, changed her attitudes towards teaching and modified her ways of thinking about how children learn. Moza discusses four modules that have significantly impacted her teaching, mentioning the communicative approach, task demands, scaffolding and learning styles as key concepts that have had a strong influence on her practices.

Sabah Al-Shibli also focuses on what she has learned from the methodology modules, particularly those that focused on learner-centred methodology, and discusses how this led her to want to be a more reflective practitioner and to help others to be more reflective. She shows how her dissertation research not only helped her and her fellow teachers to become more reflective, but how she became more confident and began to develop her own style as a Senior English Teacher.

Zeinab Al-Tobi, provides insight into how the BA course has helped her develop confidence as a Senior English Teacher, particularly in her role as a mentor. She explores how she has become a better educator for her colleagues, arguing that the BA has introduced her to many new concepts, making her more inventive and more confident in being observed. She discusses how it has developed her ability to conduct workshops that have real personal value for her teachers and that prepare them for applying new concepts in their own teaching. Finally she considers how it has helped her to be more effective in managing peer observation.

Fatma Al-Snaidi examines how the BA course has helped her develop her understanding of research and learn to investigate issues in her classroom. She mentions various modules that were particularly influential in helping her to develop research skills and argues that acquiring these skills has changed her perception of her role as a classroom teacher, making her teaching more learner-centred. She discusses how literature on TESOL issues and research has helped her to construct her own understanding of what research means and has given her the confidence to discuss and defend her beliefs and opinions.

In the final two sections, two graduates explore the relevance of the BA for their work as Regional Teacher Trainers and show how the BA has equipped them with knowledge and skills that form the basis for new learning. Ashraf Said Darwish examines how the BA helped him develop skills valuable for designing teacher training tasks, familiarized him with key concepts for delivering methodology and research methods courses, helped him to develop mentoring skills and taught him a range of life skills. Hunaiza Al-Jahdhmy shows how one particular module helped her develop skills and knowledge which have proved valuable for designing and developing materials for teacher training courses. She describes how she has applied a model she encountered in a BA module to transfer knowledge about designing materials for learners into designing materials for teachers.

2 BECOMING A BETTER TEACHER

Moza Abdullah Al-Bureikhi, Batinah North, Cohort 4

Doing the BA was one of my dreams for a long time, so I was happy when I got the chance to join this course. It proved to be a challenging experience, especially as a female with many duties in the home and school, but one which helped me to develop professionally as a teacher of young learners and as a Senior English Teacher (SET).

As a teacher the BA course expanded my knowledge and experience about teaching theories and methods. I learnt many new concepts and theories, for example from Language Acquisition and Learning, Reading and Writing and Teaching Grammar and Vocabulary modules, which gradually informed my classroom practice and helped me to better understand my classroom community. Studying theories about teaching opened the door for me to research my classroom situation, apply new teaching approaches and adapt old ones. For example, from the BA I learnt new ideas about using the communicative approach, which helped me to think carefully about how to reduce task demands by using effective

preparation activities and how to provide my pupils with a communicative purpose for interaction to help them use the language. I learned that scaffolding is very important in language teaching, that I must always bear in mind my learners' backgrounds and build new knowledge on what they already have, to increase their understanding. I learned that I should always be aware of my learners' styles of learning, so that I can use teaching methods, materials, activities and teaching aids that match their different learning preferences. I learned that children are usually able and willing to learn but need their teacher's support. As a teacher, I believe I now support my learners better by exploring their needs, learning styles and natural characteristics.

I think the most important thing I learnt from the BA was to be a reflective teacher. As teachers we benefit a lot if we reflect. For me, reflection is not just a question of describing what happened, but also a process that helps me to achieve better understanding of why something happened in a certain way and how to change it into more effective practice. The process I follow is to observe my students, note down their reactions and ways of participating and use my notes to reflect upon my teaching and think of different alternatives.

Another important thing I learnt from the BA was the importance of cooperating with colleagues. I learnt how to be a good listener and how to deal with different personalities and styles. Cooperating with other teachers has helped me to take on new roles in my school. One of these roles is a member of the training group. This role requires much planning of in-service training through workshops, seminars and peer observation. Doing the INSET and Mentoring module has provided me with rich information in this area.

Participating in the BA has helped me develop research skills. During the course I learnt how to conduct meaningful research in my teaching context. I learnt how to form research questions and choose appropriate research methods. Although it is not easy to develop investigation skills, I learnt many ideas about researching and practised them by conducting my own research in the final semester of the course. Those research skills are helping me now in understanding how my learners learn new language and in solving problems. For example, I noticed that some of my pupils had problems in recognizing certain letters. I read about this problem and asked them about it. From their answers I realized they were confusing letters with similar shapes, like 'b' and 'd'. I planned ways to help them, using materials such as sand, clay and pictures to help them practise forming the letters and I noticed that some of their problems were gradually reduced.

Writing assignments and the dissertation improved my language, especially my reading, writing and speaking skills. The wide range of reading I did expanded my vocabulary, improved my grammatical knowledge and helped me to develop my critical thinking abilities. Regarding my writing, I learnt how to argue and justify my ideas, as well as how to make my writing coherent and clear for the reader. Also during the Winter and Summer schools we were asked to discuss and share ideas in groups and give oral presentations, which improved my speaking skills and increased my confidence in speaking in front of others.

The BA course has provided me with a rich knowledge in many areas and helped me to update my teaching skills and strategies. It has enhanced my professional development in both theoretical and practical ways, and it has changed my attitudes towards teaching and my ways of thinking about how children learn.

3 BECOMING A MORE REFLECTIVE PRACTITIONER

Sabah Saleh Al-Shibli, Batinah North, Cohort 4

I was so very keen to join in the BA programme in early 2003 to improve my English and I think my language improved considerably during the first year of the course. However in addition to improving my English, I gained much from the methodology modules that focused on learner-centred methodology, which included Halliwell's (1992) ideas about focusing on children's instincts to grasp meaning from the world around them, their capacities for indirect learning, their imagination, their desire for play and fun and interaction and talk, and their creative use of limited language resources. In each of the modules I studied during the first and second years, there was input on many exciting concepts related to teaching and learning English and I tried to integrate many of them into my teaching, some successfully, others less so. After thinking of the reasons, I tried to make changes or use other methods. That might have been what led me to a greater awareness of what I do everyday in the classroom and towards becoming a more reflective teacher.

After studying the module, Researching TESOL, in the summer of 2004, I asked my tutor, "Could I focus for my dissertation research on helping my teachers develop as reflective practitioners?" He considered it was an excellent idea and explained that in the Summer School of 2005 there would be an optional module, INSET and Mentoring which would help me very much as it focused on "personal practical knowledge growth". I decided to choose that module, and meanwhile I started reading about my dissertation topic.

From my experience, I had noticed that even the good English teachers in my school used to get confused when a Regional Supervisor asked them to explain, analyze and evaluate an observed lesson. I thought perhaps they needed something like a mirror to see themselves while teaching. For that reason, I decided to video my teachers teaching in the classroom to help them think more critically about classroom events, in order to articulate their personal theories of teaching and learning English. It would also help them to formulate future plans based on an awareness of the weaknesses and strengths in their teaching, prepare themselves for future challenges and increase their awareness of the importance of decision-making. At the same time I hoped to create a more supportive environment for teaching and learning English language in the school, and develop my own style as a SET, especially in observing teachers and handling post-lesson discussions.

I used case study and action research approaches, which involved using observation, interviews, videoing each teacher and then playing the video back

during the post-lesson discussion. Teachers were fascinated as they watched themselves, their movements, actions and language in the classroom. During each discussion, which I audio-recorded, I paused the video from time to time, stimulating recall. Throughout the various stages of my dissertation research, I helped teachers to think critically, using different methods, such as input through mini-seminars, workshops, meetings and peer observations.

I feel very pleased I chose reflection on teaching for my dissertation research, because I gained numerous benefits as a teacher and SET. I am more confident when I use English in and outside the school. I am more reflective, more able to discuss teaching and identify alternatives for what I do everyday in the classroom. I feel more confident and knowledgeable in using English and my ability to write legibly has improved! I have developed abilities in conducting research. I am more confident in taking decisions. I am better at analyzing my teachers' needs. My teachers now work together as a team. Now we all sit together for a fixed time regularly to discuss the challenges we face in the classroom, apart from administrative meetings. And I am able to use a range of methods to enhance the effectiveness of peer observations.

4 BECOMING A BETTER SENIOR ENGLISH TEACHER

Zainab Mubarak Al-Tobi, Dakhiliya, Cohort 6

The BA course has had an immense impact on me as a Senior English Teacher (SET). It has developed me professionally in my role as a mentor in three main areas. First, I have started to become a better educator of my colleagues. Second, it has enabled me to conduct more effective workshops. Third, it has helped me to organise and handle more efficient peer observation.

One mentor role is as an educator. During the BA course, I came across many exciting new ideas and strategies, including using referential questions, shared reading, making learning meaningful by creating a communicative purpose for classroom activities and making learning more purposeful for learners by considering children's' characteristics. Using these and other ideas from the BA has made me more inventive and more confident to invite other teachers to observe my teaching, which might help them develop professionally if they try ideas out in their classes.

The BA has also developed my ability to conduct workshops. Firstly, it has increased my knowledge about teaching and learning, so I have valuable information to enrich the workshops I carry out, making them more interesting and informed. Secondly, modules like INSET & Mentoring helped me develop my mentoring skills and provided me with guidance on how to conduct workshops more effectively. Head and Taylor (1997) argue that an activity is not developmental unless it has real personal value for the people involved, so I have learned to plan and implement my workshops based on teachers' needs, identified through questionnaires or discussion. Another important thing that I have learned is that workshops should consist of practical activities rather than just theory. Practical activities can include adapting steps in the teacher's book or creating activities for

pupils. In addition, I have learned that an essential point in conducting workshops is preparing participants for deep learning. This can be achieved by including an activity at the end of the workshop that aims to give participants the opportunity to implement the ideas discussed. A good activity for this purpose can be micro-teaching.

Observing classes and discussing the lessons observed with the teachers are a vital part of the role of a SET. Before studying the module INSET & Mentoring, I was not aware that my work as a mentor should be based on clear principles and I found it particularly useful to verbalize my principles, particularly regarding peer observation, so now I can conduct more focused and planned peer observations. As Barber (2008) points out, although being observed is scary for many teachers, observing and being observed are the most immediate and positive means of developing as teachers.

I have learned to plan the three stages of peer observation carefully before I embark on the observation process. The first stage, which is the pre-lesson discussion, was a new idea for me despite the fact that I had been a SET for five years. At this stage the SET asks the teacher's permission to observe her; this is something I like because it helps the observee accept the observer. In addition, the focus of the observation is decided by the mentee, so she does not feel that all aspects of her teaching are under scrutiny. The time can be negotiated at this stage and the mentee can participate in designing the observation schedule.

The second stage is the lesson itself. During the lesson the mentor should not interfere but just try to smile. This helps the teacher feel better.

The last stage is the post-lesson discussion which is the stage that enhances teacher development most. The main aim at this stage is to encourage the teacher to reflect on her lesson. This can be done by asking her questions which help her to think back and reflect, aiming at eliciting weaknesses rather than telling them to the mentee. I have learned to take more care of my questions here. For example, instead of asking the teacher "Do you think pupils were active at this step?" it would be better to ask "How were the pupils at this step?" because the second question might encourage the mentee to notice and identify the areas of weakness more independently, which could result in deeper reflection. Now I also get teachers to think of alternatives rather than giving them suggestions myself, which might make solutions more memorable than just hearing them from me. Furthermore, being positive with mentees leads to development because it motivates them. This can be attained by using more positive statements, which make the mentor sound facilitative rather than authoritative.

To sum up, the BA Programme has helped me to become a more confident SET. I have started to train my colleagues to be good mentors in the future, by giving them some parts of the mentor role to practise, such as encouraging them to conduct workshops and handle staff meetings. And I am sure the impact of the BA will not stop with graduation but will continue to develop as I practise my duties.

5 DEVELOPING SKILLS OF RESEARCH

Fatma Salim Al-Snaidi, Sharqiya South, Cohort 6

Being a student on the BA course was the most wonderful experience that has ever happened to me as a teacher. It developed my understanding of the whole teaching and learning process and opened my eyes to my role as a facilitator of learning.

One of the most valuable things I learnt was how to investigate issues in my own classroom by researching in a systematic and intensive way to improve my teaching. The BA helped me to clarify in my mind why things happen as they do in my classroom and through many different modules, helped me to improve my research skills. For example, in the Tasks in Language Learning module I designed a task for my class, trialled and evaluated it using a systematic procedure, which helped me to understand how to evaluate my own work in an efficient way. In the Initial Literacy module I took one pupil's reading and writing performance and analyzed it according to certain criteria from the module. That helped me learn the importance of deep analysis in researching classroom concerns. The Assessing Children's Language Learning module showed me how to present results in an academic and professional style by teaching me ways of grouping data, displaying them clearly in diagrams or tables and commenting on their meanings. When it was time to carry out the research for my dissertation, I felt confident I could do it, since I had acquired the basic skills of researching through the different modules. Of course, these are skills that can be used to improve not only English language teaching but also teaching of other subjects in Omani schools.

Acquiring the skills of researching on the BA definitely changed me as a teacher in many ways, and in three ways in particular: in my perception of my role as a classroom teacher, in my relationship with my pupils and in my knowledge of theories relating to TESOL and research.

Developing research skills increased my awareness of my responsibilities in the classroom. Now I take my own decisions confidently based on my ability to analyse what is going on. I can solve problems which occur in lessons by testing out possible solutions and reflecting on their effects. I can also design my own materials to serve the aims I set for my learners and observe and draw conclusions about how effective they are.

Regarding my relationship with my pupils, conducting research helped me to think more about their reasons for learning and how to use their characteristics as young learners to make my teaching more effective. I honed my ability to sense what is best for my class at their level, given their abilities, favourite activities and interests. I also learnt the importance of keeping my learners at the centre of teaching. Before studying on the BA, I was mainly concerned with how to finish the curriculum on time, rather than with the learning process itself. Now, what is important to me is what the learners gain from being in the class everyday. Did they learn something useful for them? Will they be able to use it in their life? Was it interesting for them? What do they need to do to improve their ability to speak, read

and write? These kinds of questions concern me now. According to these questions, I plan my lessons, adapt the materials provided and evaluate my learners' learning.

As for my knowledge, reading about TESOL issues and research skills enabled me to gain theoretical knowledge about how to conduct investigations in the field and developed me professionally by helping me to construct an understanding of what research means and of how understandings of research have developed. It gave me the confidence to express my own point of view, to agree or disagree with what we hear from our supervisors in schools. Now I have the confidence to discuss my beliefs, to defend them and to advocate my own opinions. I have substantially developed my self-esteem.

The BA course was designed for teachers with years of experience and it gave us a great opportunity to use this experience, analyze it, test our hypotheses in teaching and our personal beliefs about learning, to develop ourselves as qualified teachers. The overall aim of the BA was to get us to think more deeply and analyze what we gained from the small research experiments that we did during the course, to see the effect of this new knowledge in our own classrooms. This inspired us and expanded our minds, encouraging us to develop our teaching further.

6 DEVELOPING AS A TEACHER TRAINER

Ashraf Said Darwish, Dhofar, Cohort 5

One year before I completed the BA (TESOL), I was nominated by my region for the post of Regional Teacher Trainer (RTT) and was offered the position, dependent on completing the BA successfully, which I did. I spent the third year of the BA programme dividing my time between three responsibilities; BA student, Senior English Teacher (SET) in my school and trainee RTT. Then, I found myself in a new and challenging job full-time and was immediately thrown into the requirements of the RTT job, planning and delivering training sessions, reflecting on them, visiting teachers in their schools and doing task analysis. It was at this stage that I began to realize the great value of the BA and how it had prepared me for this role.

A Teacher Trainer should be a good model for his teachers and that requires him to be very careful in planning, teaching and following up the effect of training on teachers' performance at school. One of the challenges I face is designing suitable training tasks for teachers. What does the word "suitable" mean? It is not just a question of selecting areas or topics that meet teachers' needs, but also planning how to deliver these tasks. For example it is very important to present tasks in ways that suit different learning styles. Planning a task therefore requires the trainer not only to use a variety of teaching methods and techniques, but also to bear in mind learners' multiple intelligences. Here I found that the knowledge and skills I had acquired in studying BA modules such as Language Acquisition and Learning and Tasks in Language Learning were very useful as they had raised my awareness of basic principles in teaching. And I found I had developed the confidence to have a go at applying what I had learned in relation to teaching - such as the importance of having a communicative purpose for a task, the importance of taking account of different learning strategies and different learning styles and preferences - to my

new role as a developer of teacher training tasks. In other words the BA had given me knowledge, skills and confidence. It was solid ground that I could put my feet on, and helped me start developing communicative teacher training tasks of my own.

When I started as a trainer, I found that, not surprisingly, the methodology courses I was expected to deliver focused substantially on concepts I had already encountered in various BA modules, for example, issues in the development of literacy in English, deductive and inductive approaches to teaching grammar and the stages of vocabulary and grammar learning. In addition, topics related to young learners' characteristics, classroom management issues, motivation, pre-teaching activities, classroom instructions, interaction patterns, learners' errors and appropriate feedback are part of the course. So again, in terms of my familiarity with methodological concepts, I found myself well-prepared for my new role.

Furthermore, the module INSET & Mentoring which I had taken as an option, guided me in performing the role of mentor in my relationships with teachers and SETs. For example, I had learned the importance of paying regular visits to teachers and providing them with continuous support to enable them to do their job more effectively and with a positive attitude. I was therefore well-prepared for this aspect of my new role.

One of the courses I am expected to conduct as an RTT is a research methods course, which is designed for Omani graduate teachers of English. It aims to enable teachers to carry out meaningful classroom research in their schools for the purpose of developing students' language learning. During the course teachers learn the skills and knowledge that will guide them to do their own research. Again I found that the skills and knowledge I had gained while researching and writing up my BA dissertation were extremely helpful. On the BA, I had been introduced to the importance of selecting a researchable topic and of using different methods to collect, analyze and interpret data, and explore and reflect rather than try to 'prove'. In terms of writing, the BA had made me familiar with the sections of a research report, such as research methodology, data analysis and interpretation, limitations. All this previous experience on the BA contributed to enabling me to conduct the Ministry's research course with confidence.

The BA also taught me a range of skills-for-life, such as, punctuality and time management and critical / deep thinking, which have further assisted me in performing my new job smoothly.

When I joined the team of RTTs, I discovered that I was not the only BA (TESOL) graduate selected to be a teacher trainer; there were also other colleagues from different regions in Oman. I believe this shows how the Leeds BA (TESOL) degree, provided for us by the Ministry of Education, prepared students well for taking on greater responsibilities, and this will in turn help develop the education system in our country.

7 DESIGNING MATERIALS FOR TRAINING TEACHERS

Hunaiza Nasser Al-Jahdhmy, Muscat, Cohort 4

This is an account of how one module on the BA TESOL Programme proved valuable for my work as a novice teacher trainer. The module was Materials Design and Development, where we examined the design and development of teacher-designed learning materials for use in the language classroom.

As a new teacher trainer I was faced with many unfamiliar tasks, including designing session materials for different teacher training courses. I realised I had high-quality experience in designing materials for young learners, but had no idea of the methodology underpinning designing teacher training materials. I decided to use a skill gained as a student on the BA Programme, starting from what I knew and building on it. Therefore, I re-read through the sessions of the Materials Design and Development module, and from there the second step became clear. I needed to transfer this knowledge into designing materials for teachers.

7.1 Materials design process

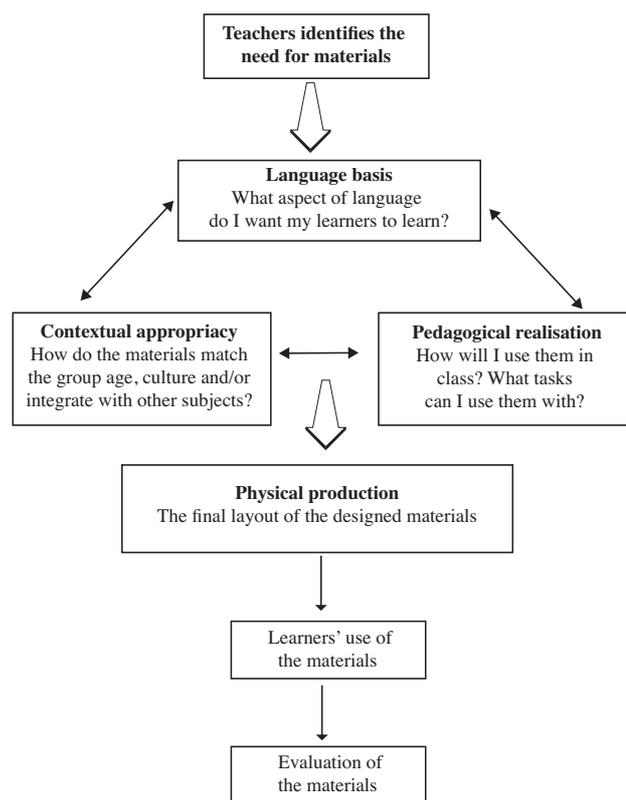


Figure 1: The materials design process (from BA TESOL module Materials Design and Development).

In the first session of the BA Materials Design module, I found the above very useful model illustrating the process of materials design:

Looking at this model, I could see how relevant it was to my own purposes. Just as when a teacher is designing language learning materials, so it is essential for a trainer to identify a need for their training materials, focusing on a specific training aim. Similarly, as with language course materials, a trainer needs to decide on the pedagogical realisation and contextual appropriacy of teacher training materials, while, when designing training materials, consideration of layout, trainees' use and evaluation are also important. So, there are many similarities between the design processes.

7.2 Topics and self-questioning

Another similarity that I realised is that materials for both teachers and children are normally based on topics. Language materials for children might be based around topics such as 'my family, animals, weather', while materials for teachers might concentrate on topics like classroom management, teacher reflection, teaching vocabulary. From this emerged the significance of another idea from the Materials Design module, which was teacher self-questioning. Self-questioning is the process that a materials designer goes through, involving asking oneself questions that eventually lead to producing materials that match and serve their outcomes and goals. I renamed this process 'trainer self-questioning'. Using this method could, for example, help me to identify the training purpose, participants' needs, and the teaching situation, as well as support course or session planning.

7.3 Criteria for materials design

Another concept introduced on the BA that facilitated my comprehension of the materials design process was the importance of identifying and following clear criteria. As teachers we may design materials according to the needs, motivation and interests of our learners, as well as giving learners a meaningful purpose for doing a task (Cameron, 2001). The authenticity of materials, if appropriately selected, could provide a bridge between the linguistic skills of the learners and their knowledge goals (Dumitrescu, 2000). Additional criteria could be interaction and language use, which refer to using tasks that could be carried out independently from the teacher and allow learners to use language creatively. Language learning materials need to provide the optimum amount of language input, enough to successfully complete the task in the time provided. Cameron (1997) adds that tasks need to have a clear beginning and end, with learners aware of this. They also need to be graded and carefully sequenced.

How could these criteria help me to shape criteria for designing training materials? First a trainer must identify a need for designing teacher training materials. This might be accomplished by conducting an initial needs analysis. Training materials should link theory to real classroom practice and experience; they should provide participants with an opportunity to explore their own beliefs about how different topics could be taught, perhaps in plenary sessions, perhaps in small group discussions. Input is also important in training, whether provided by

teachers themselves from their experience, or by the teacher trainer. It is important that training materials have a clear beginning and end. They should also be sequenced and graded for the whole course as well as in an individual teaching session.

To conclude, I would like to say that it is a challenge for anyone to manage their learning alone; however the BA Programme has helped equip its students with the knowledge and skills that can be used as a basis for new learning.

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