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## **A Comparative Evaluation of Preservice English Teachers' Coping Strategies in Oral Communication**

*This study aims at exploring Preservice English teachers' use of coping strategies for speaking and listening problems. The Oral Communication Strategy Inventory (OCSI) developed by Nakatani (2006) was used to collect data for the study. The participants were preservice English teachers at a Turkish University. The findings emanating from the questionnaire indicate that there is a significant difference in coping strategies for speaking problems in subscales such as Fluency-Oriented Strategies (FOS), Message Abandonment Strategies (MAS), and Social Affective Strategies (SAS) in favor of those students who had either spent at least one semester at a European university as a part of the Erasmus Student Exchange Program or those who reported that they frequently interacted with native speakers. A significant difference was also observed in the Fluency-Maintaining Strategies (FMS) subscale of the questionnaire relating to coping strategies for listening problems which was in favor of the same group of preservice English teachers. From the general evaluation of all the subscales of coping strategies for both speaking and listening problems, preservice English teachers revealed the lowest mean scores in the MAS subscale in speaking and in the Less Active Listening Strategies (LALS) subscale in listening problems, while they were highest in Negotiation for Meaning While Speaking (NMWS), Nonverbal Strategies While Speaking (NSWS) and Negotiation for Meaning While Listening (NMWL) subscales. These results suggest that the use of the target language in real communication settings contributes more meaningfully to the development of oral communication skills.*

### **1. Introduction**

The development of oral communication skills is very important in language classrooms and it forms an important part of language learning and teaching practices. Dörnyei and Scott (1997) state that “*effective communication in the target language needs special treatment and requires the use of strategies*” (1997, 175). As oral communication involves a complex and multifaceted language process (Murphy, 1991), many research studies have been carried out to investigate the processes and development of oral communication skills under the heading of listening and speaking skills: More recently, Goh (1997) observed that learners were highly aware of a number of issues related to listening behavior including the cognitive processes they engaged in listening. Besides, Goh (2000) identified problems that learners face during the cognitive processing phases of perception, parsing, and utilization. Hasan (2000) discovered that learners were under the false impression that they had to understand each word or every detail in a listening context.

Several factors can cause problems for language learners in listening. These factors can be grammar, speech rate, vocabulary, phonological features and background knowledge. (See Ur, 1996) “Other issues can be identified as text structure, syntax, and personal factors such as insufficient exposure to the target language and lack of interest and motivation” (Goh, 2000, 56). Brown (1995) also illustrates listeners’ difficulties as related to the levels of cognitive demands owing to the content of the texts. There are studies that have investigated the strategies employed in listening and discuss the cognitive differences between learners of different listening abilities and the cognitive view of language learning (Johnson, 1996; Skehan, 1998). While Lynch (1997) studies listening problems that arise from social- and cultural practices, Santos, Graham & Vanderplank (2008) point out methodological issues related to research into second language listening strategies.

Speaking is one of the problematic areas in language learning. It is always seen crucial for language learners. Listening, speaking and pronunciation emerge as central components of oral communication skills due to the connections between these skills. Language learners need communication strategies in order to deal with communication breakdowns. Two types of communication strategies come to the fore and they are *achievement* or *compensatory strategies* and *reduction or avoidance strategies* (see Nakatani 2006, p. 151). According to Nakatani (2006).

In the former type of strategies, learners work on an alternative plan to attain their intended goal by means of whatever resources are available. These strategies are regarded as good learners’ strategies. On the other hand, learners using the latter type of strategies avoid solving a communication problem and give up on conveying their message. These behaviors affect interaction negatively and are common among low-proficiency learners (p. 151).

Although several taxonomies for communication strategies have been presented so far only two types are commonly referred. The first is the *interactional view*, which focuses on the interaction between interlocutors and negotiation of meaning (Rost & Ross, 1991; Williams, Inscoe & Tasker, 1997, cited in Nakatani, 2006, 151). The second is the *psycholinguistic view* which focuses on the range of problem-solving activities (Kitajima, 1997; Poulisse, 1990 cited in Nakatani, 2006, 151). Additionally, Savignon (1972) highlighted the importance of coping strategies in communicative language teaching and testing. Várdi (1973, 1980) was the first to systematically analyze strategic language behavior (message adjustment in particular). Since these early studies, much research have been done to identify and classify communication strategies (CSs) (see Bialystok, 1990; Cook, 1993; and Poulisse, 1990).

However, the question of the integration of these strategies into second language or foreign language teaching programs has gained less attention. It is essential to examine the use of communication strategy, as it is the means through which learners avoid and overcome communication difficulties (Smith, 2003, 30).

Research studies have been done in order to develop instruments for the measurement of communication strategies. These studies have mostly focused on perceptions of learners about their own behaviors and the development of surveys and strategy checklists for the purpose of understanding how communication strategies are applied in real settings. Only recently did studies such as Cohen, Weaver, and Li (1998) begin to measure both student perception and performance. More recently, Nakatani (2006) developed an Oral Communication Strategy Inventory (OCSI) that focused on the means by which valid information about learner perception of use of strategy in communication tasks can be gathered systematically from English language learners. For the purposes of this study, oral communication strategies were used instead of the communication strategies as suggested by Nakatani (2006). These oral communication strategies focus on strategic behaviors that learners use when facing problems during interactional tasks.

One of the aims of instruction in the language classroom should be to provide a learning environment where learners can successfully deal with oral communication problems and thus become autonomous users of language – able to employ effective oral communication strategies. In this context, the Erasmus program can play an important role in developing oral communication skills as this program enables preservice English teachers to spend between three months and one year with students abroad (Teichler, 1996). For success abroad, Erasmus students have to carry out their daily communication in English. When surveyed, Erasmus exchange students cited improving their language skills or broadening of their academic knowledge as motivations for pursuing external semesters (Messer & Wolter, 2007) as motives. Bearing this in mind, we sought to explore the strategies preservice English teachers adopted to cope with speaking and listening problems. Additionally, we tried to obtain a picture of the means by which preservice English Teachers at Muğla University cope with oral communication problems.

### **Questions examined by the study**

- (1) Is there a difference in the use of coping strategies for oral communication problems between preservice English teachers who have already been to a European University as Erasmus exchange students and those who have not?
- (2) Is there a difference in the use of coping strategies for oral communication problems between the preservice English teachers who reported that they frequently interact with native speakers and those who do not?
- (3) (3)What does a general evaluation reveal of preservice English teachers' coping strategies when they face oral communication problems?

## **2. Method**

### *2.1. Design*

This is a correlational study that investigates preservice English teachers' reported use of coping strategies for oral communication problems.

### *2.2. Participants*

The participants were the preservice English teachers at ELT Department of Muğla Sıtkı Koçman University, Turkey. They ranged in age from 18-to 22- years-old and were admitted to the BA program upon the completion of Turkish secondary education and attainment of the required scores in the National University Entrance Exam. The aim of the program is to train English teachers for primary and secondary schools as well as for higher education institutions. They are supposed to be proficient in all language skills from the very beginning of their university education. In the present study, 203 preservice English teachers from the first year to fourth year were included to explore the coping strategies they adopt for speaking and listening problems. Although these preservice students come to the faculty with a high level of language grades, they experience communication problems as their oral communication skills are indirectly assessed during their educations. Of these preservice teachers some participated in Erasmus Student Exchange programs and have close contact with native speakers of English as the place where the university is located is famous for tourism.

## **Instrument and Procedure**

Both speaking and listening skills for interaction are essential for oral communication. The two involve strategies of a different nature. Therefore, the Oral Communication Strategy Inventory (OCSI) developed by Nakatani (2006) aims at assessing learners' use of both oral communication strategies. This questionnaire is divided into two parts. The first part deals with strategies for coping with speaking problems related to strategic behavior in communication tasks. The second part is concerned with the strategies for coping with listening problems related to strategic behavior for comprehension during interaction. The names of these strategies are detailed later in this section.

The questionnaire consists of 32 items for coping with speaking problems and 26 items for coping with listening problems during communication tasks. The participants completed these questions in English within 20 minutes. Before administering the questionnaire, the general instructions given included how to answer the items contained in the questions. All the questionnaires were distributed and collected by the researchers. Items in questionnaires were answered by the participants anonymously.

The reliability of the 32 items addressing strategies for coping with speaking problems was examined by Cronbach's alpha and a score of .86 was obtained by Nakatani (2006) (in the present study .84) indicating a high level of internal consistency. For the second part, related to the strategies for coping with listening problems and consisting of 26 items, the reliability measured by Cronbach's alpha was .85 (in the present study .80) (Nakatani, 2006).

The 32 items of the first part of the questionnaire assess strategies for coping with speaking problems and cover Social Affective Strategies(SAS) (items 28, 27, 25, 29, 26, and 23), Fluency-Oriented Strategies (FOS) (items 13, 11, 14, 9, 10, and 12), Negotiation for Meaning While Speaking (NMWS) (items 22, 21, 19, and 20), Accuracy-Oriented Strategies (AOS) (items 7, 18, 17, 8, and 30), Message Reduction and Alteration Strategies (MRAS) (items 4, 3, 5), Nonverbal Strategies While Speaking (NSWS) (items 15 and 16), Message Abandonment Strategies (MAS) (items 24, 31, 32 and 6), and Attempt to Think in English Strategies (ATES) (items 2 and 1). The 26 items of the second part of the questionnaire deal with Negotiation for Meaning While Listening (NMWL) (items 22, 21, 20, 19, and 23), Fluency-Maintaining Strategies (FMS) (items 13, 14, 15, 10, and 16), Scanning Strategies (SS) (items 26, 25, 5, and 12), Getting the Gist Strategies (GGS) (items 8, 9, 7, and 6), Nonverbal Strategies While Listening (NSWL) (items 17 and 18), Less Active Listener

Strategies (LALS) (items 11 and 24), and Word-Oriented Strategies (WOS) (items 4, 3, 2, and 1) (see, Nakatani, 2006).

### Results and Discussion

The Oral Communication Strategy Inventory was administered to the preservice English teachers to evaluate their perceived use of coping strategies for speaking and listening problems in oral communication. The findings of this study are based on those research questions.

*Table 1* presents t-test results relating to sub-scale scores of the coping strategies for the speaking problems of mobile- and non-mobile students.

Sub-scales	Status of Erasmus Student Exchange Program	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t	p
SAS	Mobile students	22	20,0909	3,8780	1.000	0.319
	Non-mobile students	177	19,4011	2,9373		
FOS	Mobile students		23,7273	4,3989	2.358	0.019*
	Non-mobile students	177	21,7966	3,5184		
NMWS	Mobile students	22	16,2273	3,3228	0.240	0.811
	Non-mobile students	177	16,0734	2,7717		
AOS	Mobile students	22	18,3182	2,7148	0.282	0.778
	Non-mobile students	177	18,1243	3,0797		
MRAS	Mobile students	22	10,5000	2,2625	-0.532	0.595
	Non-mobile students	177	10,7232	1,8019		

NSWS	Mobile	22	8,5909	1,9678	0.026	0.980
	students					
	Non-mobile	177	8,5819	1,4906		
	students					
MAS	Mobile	22	9,1818	2,5380	-3.160	0.002*
	students					
	Non-mobile	177	10,9944	2,5372		
	students					
ATES	Mobile	22	6,0455	2,1707	-0.440	0.660
	students					
	Non-mobile	177	6,1977	1,4343		
	students					

As seen in *Table 1*, there are differences in the scores of sub-dimensions of Fluency-Oriented strategies (FOS) and Message Abandonment Strategies (MAS) between the students who had already been abroad and those who had not. While the difference in Fluency-oriented Strategies (FOS) is in favor of the preservice English teachers who had been abroad, Message Abandonment Strategies (MAS) are mostly adopted by preservice English teachers who had not been abroad yet. This finding flowed from ratings of preservice English teachers to the following items in the FOS subscale when facing speaking problems such as “*I pay attention to my rhythm and intonation; I pay attention to my pronunciation; I pay attention to my conversation flow; I change my way of saying things according to context, I take my time to express what I want to say; and I try to speak clearly and loudly to make myself heard*”. On the other hand, in Message Abandonment (MAS) they were asked to rate the following items: “*I leave the message unfinished because of some language difficulty; I ask other people to help when I can’t communicate well; I give up when I can’t make myself understood; I abandon the execution of a verbal plan and just say some words when I do not know what to say*”. Of students who mostly use FOS, Nakatani (2006, 155) states that “*these students pay attention to the rhythm, intonation, pronunciation and clarity of their speech in order to improve the listener’s comprehension. They pay attention to their speaking context and take their time in order not to send inappropriate messages to their interlocutors*”. These are considered good language learner strategies. In the MAS sub-dimension, strategies are concerned with learners in communication abandoning their message. That these strategies are common among low-proficiency level speakers of a foreign language is an interesting finding. It also suggested that these language learners lack strategic competence and have no choice but to end the interaction (Nakatani, 2006, 155–6). In the present study, it was found

that those students who had already been abroad as part of the Erasmus program applied MAS less than those who had not. It is obvious that using language in authentic interactions could help student take risks and improve their language while also developing their own strategies to overcome language problems. In the other subscales, no significant differences were found between the students who were included in the present study.

*Table 2* presents the t-test results of coping strategies for speaking problems of the students who frequently interact with the native speakers and those who do not.

Sub-dimensions	Frequent interaction with native speakers	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t	p
SAS	Interaction,	84	20,0714	3,3104	2.402	0.017*
	No interaction	120	19,0250	2,8769		
FOS	Interaction,	84	22,6429	3,9013	2.189	0.030*
	No interaction	120	21,5083	3,4519		
NMWS	Interaction,	84	16,0952	2,9108	0.236	0.814
	No interaction	120	16,0000	2,7865		
AOS	Interaction,	84	18,3214	3,1667	0.924	0.356
	No interaction	120	17,9167	3,0142		



MRAS	Interac- tion,	84	10,5595	1,9286	-0.919	0.359
	No inter- action	120	10,8000	1,7757		
NSWS	Interac- tion,	84	8,7262	1,5316	1.147	0.253
	No inter- action	120	8,4750	1,5446		
MAS	Interac- tion,	84	10,1429	2,3854	-3.193	0.002*
	No inter- action	120	11,3083	2,6845		
ATES	Interac- tion,	84	5,9762	1,6426	-1.400	0.138
	No inter- action	120	6,3000	1,4413		

\*meaningful differences

*Table 2* reveals that there is a significant difference in favor of those students who frequently encounter and interact with native speakers in the sub-dimensions of Social Affective Strategies (SAS), Fluency-oriented Strategies (FOS) and Message Abandonment Strategies (MAS). One matter worth noting is that the difference in the MAS sub-dimension is in favor of those students who do not frequently encounter and interact with native speakers. The results in *Table 2* are based on the SAS sub-scale consisting of such items as “I try to relax when I feel anxious; I try to enjoy the conversation; I try to give a good impression to the listener; I actively encourage myself to express what I want to say; I do not mind taking risks even though I might make mistakes and I try to use fillers when I cannot think of what to say.” There are no significant differences in other sub-dimensions between the groups. Although there are no data regarding language proficiency levels of Erasmus exchange students, it is reported that the higher level students consciously made efforts to maintain the conversational flow by reacting smoothly when listening to their interlocutors. In short, the

high oral proficiency learners frequently used socially affective, fluency-oriented strategies, and negotiated for meaning while developing their conversations (Nakatani, 2006, p.160).

*Table 3* shows t-test results of coping strategies for listening problems of Erasmus- and non-Erasmus students.

Sub-scales	Status of Erasmus and non - Erasmus	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t	p
NMWL	Erasmus	22	18,4545	4,0559	-1.105	0.271
	Non-Erasmus	177	19,3446	3,5000		
FMS	Erasmus	22	19,7727	4,0583	1.049	0.256
	Non-Erasmus	177	19,0169	3,0683		
SS	Erasmus	22	14,4545	3,2911	-0.871	0.385
	Non-Erasmus	177	15,3107	4,4581		
GGS	Erasmus	22	14,8182	2,8890	0.383	0.702
	Non-Erasmus	177	14,6045	2,4101		
NSWL	Erasmus	22	8,2727	1,7777	-0.448	0.665
	Non-Erasmus	177	8,4350	1,5802		
LALS	Erasmus	22	5,0455	2,0113	-1.441	0.151
	Non-Erasmus	177	5,5876	1,6182		
WOS	Erasmus	22	13,3182	3,0140	-1.319	0.189
	Non-Erasmus	177	14,4011	3,6993		

As seen in *Table 3*, there is no significant difference between the t-test results of the students who had been abroad for one semester and those who had not in terms of sub-dimensions of coping strategies for listening problems.

*Table 4* presents the t-test results of coping strategies for listening problems of the students who frequently encounter and interact with native speakers and those students who do not.

Sub-scales	Status of interaction with native speakers	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t	p
NMWL	Interaction	84	19,1905	3,5380	-0.051	0.959
	No interaction	120	19,2167	3,6188		
FMS	Interaction	84	19,6190	3,2298	2.064	0.040*
	No interaction	120	18,6917	3,1081		
SS	Interaction	84	15,0119	2,5341	-0.581	0.610
	No interaction	120	15,3250	5,2005		
GGS	Interaction	84	15,0119	2,5812	1.957	0.052
	No interaction	120	14,3250	2,3840		
NSWL	Interaction	84	8,5357	1,5006	0.892	0.373
	No interaction	120	8,3333	1,6568		
LALS	Interaction	84	5,3333	1,7169	-1.191	0.235
	No interaction	120	5,6167	1,6408		
WOS	Interaction	84	13,6786	2,4796	-1.818	0.071
	No interaction	120	14,6167	4,2489		

Analysis of the results in *Table 4* reveals there is a significant difference in favor of the students who frequently encounter and interact with native speakers in the sub-scale of Fluency-maintaining Strategies (FMS). The strategies in the questionnaire are measured with items such as *“I pay attention to the speaker’s rhythm and intonation; I send continuation signals to show my understanding in order to avoid communication gaps; I use circumlocution to react to the speaker’s utterance when I do not understand his/her intention well; I ask the speaker to give an example when I am not sure what s/he has said; I pay attention to the speaker’s pronunciation”*. It is also suggested that the learners who most use Fluency Maintaining Strategies (FMS) tend to pay attention to the fluency of conversational flow (Nakatani, 2006, 156). On this aspect, Rost & Ross (1991, cited in Nakatani, 2006) proposed that these strategies help EFL learners keep interactions going in order to achieve mutual communication goals successfully. However, there is no significant difference in the other sub-scales of the questionnaire.

Table 5 shows the general outline of coping strategies for speaking problems in the ELT Department.

	SAS	FOS	NMWS	AOS	MRA	NSWS	MAS	ATES
Mean	3,2426	3,6626	4,0098	3,6167	3,5670	4,2892	2,7071	3,0833
Std. Deviation	,5164	,6129	,7079	,6153	,6131	,7702	,6558	,7659

Analysis of the mean values of the subscales of the questionnaire reveals that preservice English teachers who participated in the study scored the lowest (2.7071) for the sub-scale Message Abandonment Strategies (MAS). It could mean that preservice teachers are aware of coping strategies for oral communication but do not utilize them frequently as they are believed to be not very effective. On the other hand, they are good at Negotiation for Meaning while Speaking (NMWS) and Nonverbal Strategies While Speaking (NSWS)

Table 6 notes the means and standard deviations of all the categories of coping strategies for listening problems.

	NMWL	FMS	SS	GGs	NSWL	LALS	WOS
Mean	3,8412	3,8147	3,7990	3,6520	4,2083	2,7500	3,5576
Std. Deviation	,7154	,6368	1,0754	,6210	,7968	,8371	,9121

The mean values in Table 6 show that the preservice English teachers scored the lowest in the LALS category (Less Active Listener Strategies). These strategies are believed to represent negative attitudes towards the use of active listening strategies for interaction. Huang & van Naerssen (1987, cited in Nakatani, 2006, 153) reported that less successful learners tend to use these strategies when facing difficulties in communication. The items that measure this subscale include *“I try to translate into native language little by little what the speaker has said; I only focus on familiar expressions”*. Meanwhile, the highest score was for the subscale Negotiation for Meaning While Listening Strategies (NMWL). These strategies involve such items as *“I ask for repetition when I can’t understand what the speaker has said; I request a clarification when I am not sure what the speaker has said; I ask the speaker to use easy words when I have difficulty in comprehension; I ask the speaker to slow down when I can’t understand what the speaker has said; I make clear to the speaker what I haven’t been able to*

*understand*". It is claimed that the use of these strategies could enhance students' opportunities to learn the foreign language through interaction (see, Pica, 1996; Williams, Insoe & Tasker, 1997).

It is commonly believed that communication problems mostly occur at lower levels of processing in listening (Berne, 2004). Furthermore, Nakatani (2005) studied the effects of awareness-raising on use of oral communication strategy. His findings revealed that students in the strategy training group significantly improved their oral test scores compared with the students who did not have this training. Additionally, Green & Oxford (1995) found successful learners made greater use of learning strategies and women used strategies more often than men. However, in the present study, while no meaningful differences were found between genders or school levels, meaningful differences were found based on students' experiences with real-life English language encounters. Perhaps to both off-set that difference and improve the communication skills of students who interact with English speakers, more communication strategy awareness education should be provided.

The literature contains studies that discuss the benefits of raising learner awareness of communicational strategies. Sayer (2005, 22) conducted an action research project undertaken to examine the effectiveness of tasks designed to raise learner awareness of conversational strategies and found that the students picked up on many of the features presented through the tasks, and incorporated them into their performance on subsequent tasks. Goh & Taib's (2006, 222) research was a small-scale study of metacognitive instruction of young second language listeners and discussed the value of lessons that highlight the listening process involving "metacognitive instruction". After eight lessons students reported a deeper understanding of the nature and demands of listening, greater confidence in completing listening tasks and better strategic knowledge to cope with comprehension difficulties. In his study, Dörnyei (1995) discussed the possibility of developing the quality and quantity of learners' use of some communication strategies through focused instruction. On the other hand, the findings in Maleki's (2007) study of two groups – of which only one group was taught specific communication strategies and the other was not – suggest that teaching communication strategies is pedagogically effective, and that interactional strategies are more effectively and intensively used at the end of a four-month teaching period.

## Conclusion

It is obvious that the development of oral communication skills holds an important place in language teaching and learning efforts and that communicative competence cannot be acquired without these skills. Oral communication strategies play a significant role in achieving successful and effective communication by helping users to overcome communication breakdowns. In this context, preservice English teachers should be aware of these strategies and they should use them personally so that they can be good models for their students in their future teaching practices and likewise teach these strategies to their students.

In the present study, the students who spent one semester in a European university in the framework of an Erasmus Student Exchange Program and those who frequently interacted with native speakers were observed to be more aware of effective oral communication strategies and scored higher points in the questionnaire than the students who had not participated in such language exchanges. Significant differences were observed in some of the subscales such as FOS (Fluency-oriented strategies) and MAS (Message Abandonment strategies) as coping strategies for speaking problems with those who studied abroad scoring more confidently by using positive coping strategies more frequently. The same significant difference in those subscales was observed in favor of the students who frequently interact with native speakers. Moreover, for listening problems, a significant difference was observed for the students who frequently interact with native speakers in the subscale of FMS (Fluency-maintaining strategies).

General evaluations of the means of coping strategies for speaking problems of all preservice English teachers in the study indicate that they scored the highest mean point in the subscales of NMWS (Negotiation for Meaning While Speaking) and NSWS (Nonverbal Strategies While Speaking). On the other hand, they scored the lowest mean in MAS, which is a desirable result for preservice English teachers. General evaluation of the mean scores of coping strategies for listening problems showed that the lowest mean was in LALS (Less Active Listener Strategies). Conversely, the highest score was in NMWL (Negotiation for Meaning While Listening).

The results of the present study suggest that the students who have the opportunity to participate in Erasmus and study abroad benefit from their external semester by developing their oral language proficiency. Teichler (1996, 155–6) likewise found that improving foreign language skills was a primary motivation for Swiss students in particular to study abroad. A desire to improve their academic knowledge took second place. Establishing useful connections (18.6 %) was not considered important. Messer & Wolter (2007) argue that it is

possible that student mobility increases the awareness of cultural differences and other such matters and that these effects generate a private- and social return.

With this study, language teacher trainers and related institutions can be informed of preservice English teachers' use of coping strategies for oral communication problems. The present results could encourage ELT departments to send more students abroad within the framework of Erasmus programs. To that end, more bilateral agreements would need to be signed between foreign language teacher training institutions. In so doing, preservice English teachers can develop both their language and teaching skills by participating in different learning and teaching environments through a semester in a different country.

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