

A study of the relationship between self efficacy and English writing performance of the English majors

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Abstract:

Self-efficacy is a core concept in Bandura's social cognitive theory, which refers to the belief in a person's ability to perform any given task or behavior. This study is carried out to investigate the relationship between self-efficacy and English writing performance of the English majors. The final findings are as the following: firstly, this study proved that the overall writing self-efficacy of English majors is at an intermediate level, and the writing influential factor is the highest, followed by writing skill self-efficacy and writing task self-efficacy. Secondly, this study explores the correlation between writing self-efficacy and writing performance of sophomore English majors, and then finds that there is no relationship between them.

Keywords: Self-efficacy, English writing performance, English majors

1. Introduction

Self-efficacy is a core concept in Bandura's social cognitive theory, which refers to the belief in a person's ability to perform any given task or behavior. Self-efficacy affects and determines the individual's choice of behavior and the persistence of behavior, because it has more impact on one's thinking model and emotional response model, thus further affects the acquisition of new behaviors. In order to explore the intrinsic language learning world of English learners, to have a research on the individuals' psychological and cognitive activities is quite urgent.

With the rapid communication of each country today, writing is becoming more and more indispensable and it has weighed a lot in the position of both language learning and teaching. Writing is an effective way of language output which can reflect the learner's language level. Li (2006) believes that writing should play an important role in second language acquisition. It is also known that English writing is a cognitive as well as an affective activity.

Shell (1995) defined writing self-efficacy as students' self-evaluation of their own writing skills. What is more, writing self-efficacy is also seen as individuals' judgment of their own competence in writing. The language learners' differences have been an aim for most researchers to pay attention to in the field of second language acquisition, such as age, transfer, motivation, as well as cognitive style. To some great extent, the learners' differences can have an effect on the choices of language learning strategies and the performance of language learning. A large review of the researches indicates that researches into writing self-efficacy comprise a quite importance role of the study of individual factors.

This study is carried out to investigate the relationship between self-efficacy and English writing performance of the English majors. There are two questions needed to be worked out in this study. For one, does the English major have a sense of self-efficacy when writing English essays? Is there any significant correlation between self-efficacy and English writing performance?

2. Literature review

2.1 Studies of self-efficacy

Albert Bandura first proposed the concept of self-efficacy in 1977. He is a well-known cognitive psychologist in the United States. At first, he believed that self-efficacy was a perception of people's ability to complete a given task. Self-efficacy is related to personal self-confidence. Then in 1986, Bandura strengthened the connotation of self-efficacy in his publication "Social Foundations of Thought and Action". He believes that self-efficacy refers to the belief in one's ability to organize and implement a course of action. This kind of belief may affect the way people choose to act, how much effort they put in, how long they will persist in the face of obstacles and difficulties, their flexibility in adversity, and whether their way of thinking is self-aiding, how much pressure and frustration they have endured in dealing with demanding environmental requirements, and the level of achievement they hope to achieve (Bandura, 1986).

Since Bandura advocated the theory of self-efficacy, many researchers have devoted themselves to this study. Some researchers have also put forward the concept of self-efficacy based on various research perspectives, but they all still explain and follow Bandura's definition. Oxford and Shearin (1994) proposed that if learners want to make the relevant efforts necessary to master a new language, the learners must firmly believe that they will be able to control the results of learning and must have a belief in effectiveness. Ehrman (1995) believes that self-efficacy can rely on one's own ability to cope with certain difficulties to some extent. Pintrich and Schunk (1996) state that self-efficacy refers to the ability of individuals to believe that they have the required skills and that they can perform well in the

process of activities to achieve achievement. In addition, according to Huang Ying (2006), self-efficacy is the notion that people consider their abilities to successfully complete a given task or activity.

Bandura thought that self-efficacy beliefs have an influence on human mainly in following factors: the role of making choices, the role of motivation, the role of thought patterns and emotional reactions, the role of mediator of cognition and performance. Firstly, Self-efficacy has an influence on making choices. Bandura (1997) believes that self-efficacy is very important in deciding what choices should be taken. In addition, he also pointed out that people with a sense of self-efficacy are more likely to choose more challenging tasks and commit to them. Secondly, self-efficacy usually plays a major role in thinking processes involving motivation. Self-efficacy affects people's effort and perseverance. Students with higher self-efficacy tend to have more confidence in themselves. As a result, they want to spend more energy and perseverance to complete the required tasks. And those students with low self-efficacy may doubt their abilities and avoid trying certain tasks (Zimmerman, 1989). Thirdly, another aspect of self-efficacy that can affect an individual is that it will become an mediator mechanism that affects the learner's way of thinking and his emotional reaction (Bandura, 1997). Self-efficacy tends to affect people's emotional state in the face of emergencies, and this emotional reaction affects their behavior by changing their thinking process. When individuals are in a situation of danger and disaster, their self-efficacy will determine the emotional reaction under stressful conditions. Fourthly, self-efficacy can be seen as a bridge connecting the role of meditation and the cognitive participation of the learner. With this sense of self-efficacy, their cognitive strategy may be used more frequently. As a result, their final performance can be greatly improved (Bandura, 1997).

2.2 Studies of writing self-efficacy

At present, there are many definitions of writing self-efficacy at home and abroad, McCarthy, Meier, and Rinderer (1989) defined writing self-efficacy as students' self-evaluation of their own writing skills. Writing self-efficacy is also regarded as individuals' judgment of their competence in writing, specifically their ability to write different writing tasks and of their possession of varying composition, usage, and mechanical skills (Pajares, 1993). The other definition is the combination of the former. Shell and Murphy (1989) thought that writing self-efficacy is composed of two parts. The first is the confidence that students could successfully perform specific writing skills such as grammar, usage, composition, and mechanical writing skills such as correctly punctuating or organizing sentence into a paragraph so to clearly express a theme. The second is confidence that students successfully complete specific writing tasks such as writing a paper, authoring a short fiction story, or writing a letter to a friend. It is not difficult to find writing self-efficacy concept differentiated from the concept of self-efficacy Bandura proposed.

Efficacy beliefs about writing have received attention both from researchers in the field of composition and from self-efficacy researchers. In the past, researchers in the field of writing composition have focused on the processes in which writers engage as they compose an essay. Cognitive aspects and affective factors have been particular attended as researchers have attempted to understand the thought processes underlying the compositions of students. Hull and Rose(1989) noted that the more researchers learned about the relationship between cognition and writing, the more complex the relationship seemed to be. Recent efforts have revealed the influence of self-efficacy beliefs on various writing outcomes. These research results demonstrated that students' confidence in their writing capabilities have an impact on their writing motivation as well as various writing

outcomes in school. During the past 20 years, some investigators have addressed the complexity by studying affective factors involved in writing processes. These factors include the confidence with which students approach writing task, the writing anxiety that students feel as they attempt writing task, the value of writing students perceived, students' self-efficacy for regulation—the confidence to use self-regulated learning strategies, and the feelings of self-worth associated with writing. As a result, most writers have explored the relationship between students' self-efficacy beliefs about writing, other motivational variables related to writing, and various writing outcomes (Pajares, 1998).

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants

The participants selected for the research are 30 sophomores of English major in Northwestern Polytechnical University. All of them attended a English writing course taught by a foreign teacher, Tanner. These 30 participants completed the composition on their own according to the topic arranged by Tanner.

3.2 Instrument

There are two instruments in this study. One is English writing self-efficacy questionnaire and the other is interview. In terms of questionnaire, the widely acknowledged scales of writing self-efficacy are conducted by Shell, Murphy and Brunning in 1989 and by Pajares in 1994. The scale in this study is based on the origin scale and made some necessary revisions. The scale testifies the degrees of English writing based on the well-known five-point Likert scale, which ranges from 1 to 5 (1=I'm totally not sure about it; 2=I'm often not sure about it; 3=I'm sometimes sure about it; 4=I'm often sure about it; 5=I'm totally sure about it). In light of interview, 10 participants will be selected according to the different levels of self-efficacy and English writing proficiency. The author will have an interview with these 10 participants and ask them some questions about their self-efficacy when writing English composition.

3.3 Software

With all the data collected, the author will input the scores of both the writing self-efficacy and the English writing to the SPSS. Firstly, the author may take advantage of means and standard deviation to judge what the subjects' self-efficacy are. Secondly, Pearson correlations analysis will be used to explore the relation between self-efficacy and English writing proficiency of the subjects.

4. Results & Discussion

This part mainly displays a descriptive analysis of statistical data, including writing task self-efficacy (WTS), writing skill self-efficacy (WSS) and writing influential factors (WIF). After that, the self-efficacy of writing will be discussed in detail based on the data in the questionnaire and interview.

4.1 General Status Quo of the writing self-efficacy

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of overall writing self-efficacy

	WTS	WSS	WIF
N	30	30	30
Mean	27.2800	27.9800	28.8200
SD	5.73855	4.92719	4.39784
Minimum	8.00	8.00	8.00
Maximum	40.00	40.00	40.00

In Table 1, in terms of mean values, it is not difficult to find that the WIF is the highest with 29.82, followed by the WSS and WTS, which are 28.18 and 27.28 respectively. This shows that sophomore English majors have more confidence in mastering writing skills than writing tasks and writing influential factors. According to the Likert scale, the mean value is at a high level between 28-40, the mean value is at a medium level between 20-28, and the mean value is at a low level between 8-20. The results in Table 1 show that the level of WIF in English writing self-efficacy is between 28-40, which is at a high level. In the other two dimensions of writing self-efficacy, the mean values of WTS and WSS are 27.28 and 27.98 respectively. These mean values are between 20-28, which are in the medium level. It clearly shows that the subjects are not very confident in their English writing. And they think they master writing influential factors much better than writing tasks and writing skills. In the following sections, the author will focus on the mean values and standard deviation. An detailed descriptions of the sub-items of WTS, WSS and WIF will be displayed respectively.

4.1.1 Writing task self-efficacy

4.1.2

Table 2. The rank order of sub-items of writing task self-efficacy

Rank	Writing task self-efficacy	Mean	SD
I	General Writing	3.56	0.95
	2. I am able to finish English dairies to describe my daily experiences of the things I have done and so on.	3.67	1.08
	3. I am able to write a book review that I have read in English.	3.33	0.88
	6. I am able to write someone or something that I am acquainted with in 100-150 English words.	3.99	0.92
	7. I am able to accomplish the written tasks within the required time and get a great mark in English writing exams.	3.11	0.95
	8. I am able to do the written tasks well each time.	3.70	0.94
II	Practical Writing	3.19	1.01
	1. I am able to write letters or emails to my friends in English,	3.73	1.00
	4. I am able to write an English note and a school sports meeting notice in English.	2.95	1.02
	5. I am able to write resumes in English.	2.90	1.02

Table 2 shows the order of the sub-items of the self-efficacy of the writing task. It clearly shows that the general writing category (Mean = 3.56, SD = 0.95) ranks first compared to practical writing (Mean= 3.19, SD = 1.01).

In general writing category, “I am able to write someone or something that I am acquainted with in 100-150 English words” ranks first whose mean value is 3.99, and SD is 0.92, which indicates that the subjects are confident about their abilities in a short article. In addition, the subcategory “I am able to do the written tasks well each time” has a mean of 3.70 and SD is 0.94, which ranks second in this category. It suggests that every time subjects start writing, they are very sure of themselves.

In practical writing category, “I am able to write letters or emails to my friends in English” comes first, which tells us that the sophomore of English majors are more confident in English communication in daily life. They have no difficulty communicating with friends in their daily English life. In addition, the mean value of the subcategory “I am able to write an English note and a school sports notice in English” is 2.95 and the SD is 1.02, ranking second in this category. The results show that the subjects do not use practical English to make some notification frequently in daily life.

4.1.3 Writing skill self-efficacy

Table 3. The rank order of sub-items of writing skill self-efficacy

Rank	Writing skill self-efficacy	Mean	SD
I	Stylistic writing skill	3.98	1.01
	8. I am able to write various styles with suitable writing skills in accordance with the directions of the writing tasks.	3.98	1.01
II	Overall writing skill	3.32	0.88
	1. I am able to well understand the requests and making the first writing draft.	3.43	0.90
	2. When finishing choosing a topic, I am able to get plenty of relevant materials to write.	3.20	0.86
III	Expressing skill	3.09	0.93
	3. When I am writing a composition, I am able to finish a simple sentence with right punctuation and grammar.	3.27	0.98
	4. When I am writing a composition, I am sure that I have certain English vocabulary.	2.72	0.98
	6. When I am writing a composition, I have no difficulty delivering my view and emotions accurately.	3.28	0.91
IV	Revising skill	2.95	0.98
	5. I tend to understand how to revise the writing draft.	2.95	0.98
V	Organizing skill	2.72	0.98
	7. When I am writing a composition, I am able to use effective transfer to get coherence between sentences and paragraphs.	2.72	0.98

Table 3 clearly shows the rank order of the sub-items of writing skill self-efficacy in terms of the mean value and standard deviation. It can be clearly found that the first one is stylistic writing skills (mean = 3.98, SD = 1.01), then comes to overall writing skills (mean = 3.32, SD = 0.86), expressing skill (mean = 3.09, SD = 0.93), revised skills (mean = 2.95, SD = 0.98) and organizing skills (mean = 2.72, SD = 0.98). This shows that the sophomore of English majors are more confident in various

styles of writing skills, but lack confidence in organizing skills. To be specific, in light of overall writing skills, “I am able to write various styles with suitable writing skills in accordance with the directions of the writing tasks” ranks first whose mean value is 3.98 and SD is 1.01, which means that the sophomore of English major can master the ability to use a variety of styles in English writing. However, in organizing skills category, “When I am writing a composition, I am able to use effective transfer to get coherence between sentences and paragraphs” comes last whose mean value is 2.72 and SD is 0.98, which indicates that the sophomore of English major may not master the ability to write a composition coherently and cohesively.

4.1.4 Writing influential factors

Table 4. The rank order of sub-items of writing influential factors

Rank	Writing influential factors	Mean	SD
I	Verbal persuasion	4.25	0.82
	4. If the teacher thinks highly of my English writing, I will be more confident.	4.25	0.82
II	Emotional and physiological states	3.93	0.80
	5. When I am in a good emotional state, I am sure I can do well.	4.07	0.69
	6. When I feel nervous, my confidence will be affected.	3.79	0.91
III	Vicarious experience	3.85	0.87
	3. If someone who is similar to my English writing level achieves good writing results, then I am confident to do so.	3.85	0.87
IV	Performance experiences	3.58	0.91
	1. If I attained success in writing previously, I will feel more confident in myself.	4.29	0.73
	2. If I spend lots of time on English writing, the outcome is not satisfactory, I will lose my confidence.	3.39	1.10
	7. When I get a high score in writing, I will owe it to my hardworking,	3.82	0.77
	8. When I get a high score in writing, I will owe it to my good luck.	2.83	1.05

Table 4 lists the rank order of sub-items of writing influential factors. It can be clearly stated that the sophomore of English majors are most affected by verbal persuasion (mean = 4.25, SD = 0.82). Emotional and physiological state ranks the second (mean = 3.93, SD = 0.80), followed by vicarious experience (mean = 3.85, SD = 0.87) and performance experience (mean = 3.58, SD = 0.91). It shows that if others praise or encourage students more frequently, the sophomore of English majors will have more confidence in their English writing. “If the teacher thinks highly of my English writing, I will be more confident” comes first whose mean value is 4.25 and SD is 0.82, which means that teacher can have great influence on students and plays a special role in English writing. If the teacher give someone a high expectation, the subject may be more confident. “When I get a high score in writing, I will owe it to my good luck” comes last, which indicates that some students are not very confident about themselves. They don’t believe they can get good grades, and try to attribute every achievement to their good luck.

4.2 Correlations between writing performance and writing self-efficacy

In this section, to find the correlation between writing performance and writing self-efficacy, the Pearson correlation test is applied. In this study, the average English writing test score is regarded as an indicator of writing performance. Table 5 shows the correlation between writing performance and writing self-efficacy. At the 0.05 level (2-tailed) $P \leq 0.05$, the correlation is significant. However, it can be seen from Table 5 that the significance is higher than P . That is, $P > 0.05$. The data shows that there is no correlation between writing performance and writing self-efficacy. This means that self-efficacy has no effect on writing performance. This result is inconsistent with the assumption that there is a correlation between writing self-efficacy and English writing performance.

Table 5. Correlations of writing self-efficacy and writing performance

		WTS	WSS	WIF
WP	Pearson Correlation	0.110	0.044	-0.033
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.274	0.661	0.744
	No. of cases	30	30	30

Note: Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed) $P \leq 0.05$

4.3 Discussion of interview about relations between writing performance and writing self-efficacy

In the previous part, the results of all relevant research questions were revealed. The first result shows the current situation of sophomore English majors' writing self-efficacy; the second result puts forward the correlation between writing performance and writing self-efficacy. Therefore, in this part, the results will be analyzed in detail based on the content of the interview.

4.3.1 The status quo of students' writing self-efficacy

It can be seen from the main text that the writing self-efficacy of sophomore English majors is moderate. This means that the subjects have an intermediate knowledge of their writing performance. In the interview, the interviewee said that, on the one hand, Chinese students have been learning English for many years, but most of the teaching methods are boring, which leads to their lack of an English learning atmosphere. Therefore, their understanding of English mainly comes from various written materials, videos or movies, and teacher explanations. They can only understand a little English culture and related knowledge. Students cannot get a real writing environment. Although they have been doing their best to write in English for a long time, the results are still far from reaching expectations. Therefore, most Chinese students have only moderate confidence in their writing performance.

On the other hand, firstly, many students pointed out that they came from less affluent families, so they rarely went abroad before. When they were growing up, almost no one could speak English. They may sometimes have the opportunity to contact several English speakers. These students usually only learn English from teachers and textbooks. In addition, they can only ask for help from teachers or classmates when they encounter problems. In underdeveloped areas, there are no advanced multimedia classrooms and no excellent English recording materials. Except for listening carefully to the English teacher in class, they have no other conditions to listen to or speak English. In this case, students can only rely on rote memorization of English pronunciation. To some extent, most of their learning is silent English, and there is no way to use it as a communication tool.

Secondly, excessive examination pressure is another possible reason. In most cases, both teachers and parents agree that “the higher the requirements, the greater the motivation”. However, they pay little attention to the two possible consequences of motivation: the sense of success when they make great progress and the sense of loss and anxiety when they fail the exam. As mentioned above, English is considered to be the earliest foreign language in China, and it is mostly learned in the Chinese context, which will lead to general learning anxiety. At the same time, it will reduce students' sense of self-efficacy in learning. Teachers and parents naturally see their students or children succeed in English learning. For the students themselves, passing the exam and receiving a scholarship or certificate seems to be the only sign of success. Therefore, this is indeed a very heavy burden.

In the interview, the students also stated that in most cases, students do not have the opportunity to practice English writing under the guidance and help of an English teacher. In turn, this will make students feel uncertain about English writing. In addition, under normal circumstances, English teachers will arrange some writing tasks for students, but the frequency does not reach the level of one per day. The class size may be another potential reason for their lack of confidence in English writing. According to interviews, there are usually about 20 students in the class. This class size makes it impossible to solve all problems. Students whose writing problems cannot be solved well will more or less feel lost and frustrated. To make matters worse, some students are not even willing to actively seek help from teachers.

4.3.2 The relationship between writing self-efficacy and writing performance

The results tell us that there is no correlation between self-efficacy and writing performance in the field of English writing. In order to find out the reasons for the results, 10 students were interviewed and some possible reasons were obtained. Firstly, there is a lack of sufficient practice. People generally think that practice is perfect. Without proper English writing practice, it is impossible to have a good writing level. As mentioned in the literature review, self-efficacy is directly related to proficiency. When the individual faces difficulties, frustrations and obstacles, self-efficacy will affect the individual's effort, durability and endurance during the activity. Especially for those challenging tasks, perseverance and endurance are one of the basic conditions for achievement. Therefore, students with a higher sense of self-efficacy tend to have more confidence in them, and they are willing to spend more energy and perseverance to complete tasks. Those with low self-efficacy tend to have doubts about their abilities and avoid trying tasks. According to the current situation of English majors' self-efficacy in writing, their overall self-efficacy is a medium. In other words, they have less work in English writing. As university students, they have mastered how to make timetables to arrange learning tasks to a certain extent. In fact, they should spend more time practicing English writing and take into account more aspects. Only in this way can they improve their writing skills. However, if they just have enough confidence in themselves instead of focusing on writing, then their chances of making progress in English writing are small.

Secondly, the types of writing strategies used are very limited. It is generally recognized that learning strategy is one of the most important variables to distinguish individual differences in academic performance. Foreign research on language learning strategies in the SLA field began in the middle of 1970. With the development of student-centered teaching methods and the popularization of learners' autonomous learning, the study of learning strategies has become an “explosive increase in activities” in recent years. Learning strategy is the learning process of complex solutions that learners make consciously to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of learning. As far as the correlation between writing strategy and writing ability is concerned, a lot of research has been done at home and

abroad. Almost all studies have concluded that there is a link between learning strategies and writing ability. Learning strategies can reflect learners' attitudes towards learning. However, according to student interviews, it can be clearly seen that students lack writing strategies, which is also one of the factors affecting writing performance. Even if students think that their English writing skills are very good, they have fewer strategies. Although their writing self-efficacy is very high, their writing performance cannot reach a high level.

Thirdly, the motivation is weak. Motivation is another undeniable factor that may affect the level of English writing. Gardner (1985) developed a social education model of language learning, which mainly contains three aspects. Gardner thoroughly studied motivation. His concept of motivation is very famous. He believes that individuals will try their best to learn this language according to their own wishes, and that individuals can also be satisfied in this behavior. Most researchers believe that motivation is related to people's choices of practical actions, perseverance, and effort. There are many researches on motivation classification in SLA. The most famous division of motivation was first proposed by Gardner and Lambert in 1959. They are instrumental motivation and comprehensive motivation. Learners have a positive interest in the target language society, and they hope to become a member of the community. Although instrumental motivation indicates that learners' interest in language learning is related to external requirements, such as passing exams, obtaining certificates, and finding a good job. Gardner also claimed that learners with comprehensive motivations will be interested in interacting with speakers of the target language, and that they are more likely to successfully master the language than those who do so for instrumental reasons. As sophomores majoring in English, they will think about two choices in the future: one is to continue their studies, and the other is to find a good job after graduation. For them, most people have instrumental motivation, which means that the purpose of their writing is to pass the exam and obtain a certificate. Therefore, their comprehensive approach is seriously insufficient, that is, they lack the enthusiasm for English writing. Once they do not have enough motivation to write, it is difficult for them to improve their writing skills.

5. Conclusion

This study aims to explore the correlation between writing self-efficacy and English writing performance. At the same time, it also intends to find out the current situation of English majors with self-efficacy in the form of descriptive statistics. This study proved that the overall writing self-efficacy of English majors is at an intermediate level, and the writing influential factor is the highest, followed by writing skill self-efficacy and writing task self-efficacy. Based on the interview, the main reason for the result is the fact that students lack access to real written materials. They are stuck with test pressure; specific instructions for English writing are not enough. The correlation test of this research shows that there is no relationship between writing self-efficacy and English writing performance. This shows that English majors lack sufficient practicality, the types of writing strategies are too limited, and the motivation for the results is weak.

This study explores the correlation between writing self-efficacy and writing performance of sophomore English majors. However, there is no relationship between them. Based on this finding, it means that self-efficacy has no effect on writing performance. However, according to the interview, some teaching strategies are provided to improve students' writing skills:

For one, writing practice should be highly valued. Without sufficient practice, it is difficult to obtain satisfactory results. On the one hand, teachers should allocate more writing tasks on various topics. On the other hand, as college students, students should have a certain degree of self-discipline

and should learn to be responsible for their own English learning. If they finish writing, they can turn to the teacher or student to revise the writing. As a result, their writing skills can be improved.

For another, learning strategies weigh a lot. Cohen (1998) proposed learning strategies. According to his ideas, learning strategies can be seen as learning processes that learners consciously choose. Then, learning strategies may lead to actions to improve the learning of another language. The learning strategy is mainly done through storage, recall and extraction. Just like the findings in the interview, English majors lack certain writing strategies, which may make it difficult for them to improve their writing skills. Therefore, adequate training in the use of English writing strategies is very important for English majors. At the same time, this also requires teachers to develop their teaching methods. For students, they will face more challenges. As far as teachers are concerned, the most urgent task they should keep in mind is that they must be aware of the importance of training students to use various English writing strategies. Teachers need to briefly understand students' preferences for writing strategies during the writing process.

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