EFL Teacher candidates' Perceptions of Group Work

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Abstract:

In Higher Education (HE), students are provided with the opportunity to develop their professional interactive skills through working in groups (Maiden & Perry, 2011). Such practice is no different in Bahrain Teachers' College (BTC) were EFL teacher candidates are often tasked to do group projects because of its valuable learning benefits, but the issues that come with these group projects need attention. The aim of this action research is to shed light on the problems EFL teacher candidates are having when working together as well as to explore their abilities in solving these issues. A survey of three main open questions was administered to 27 pre-service EFL teachers answers of which were analyzed, quantified and classified under broad themes. Findings from data analysis revealed that (1) the lack of effective communication between group members and (2) the poor group organization skills are the two main issues encountered. Interestingly, results also showed that most of these teacher candidates knew how to solve these issues and viewed an ideal group member as someone responsible, flexible, respectful and punctual. Conclusions drawn from this research emphasize the need to raise EFL teacher candidates' awareness on the pitfalls of working in groups by training them how to communicate effectively and how to set group rules and respect those rules to experience a successful trouble-free group work that will maximize their potential in developing interactive skills so needed in their teaching profession.

Research Background

Various scholars worldwide have revealed the effectiveness of collaboration in learning (Chiang, 2012; Tsybulsky et al., 2019). Working in groups or collaboratively in almost all educational institutions has become an integral part of teachers' approaches in class (Graziano & Navarette 2012; Linz, Heater, and Howard 2011; Tsybulsky et al., 2019). An expanding body of literature highlights that group work allows students to develop their communication skills as well as achieve the intended learning outcomes of the courses they are enrolled in (Fung, To, & Liang, 2016; Iqbal et al., 2016; Mellingsæter & Bungum, 2015, Said & Weda, 2018, Chiang, 2012). In the same line of thought, Fung & Liang (2018) argued

that group work promotes one's ability to think critically, develops personal responsibility, enhances individual logical reasoning as well as questioning, and creates healthy interdependence. Porter (2006) highlights that students who work in groups are able to score better results and are more content than those who work individually. The effectiveness of group work is highly dependent on students' commitment to the assigned tasks. Students' optimal engagement in group discussion through active listening to diverse ideas, probing, debating and arguing ensures that learning is taking place and communication skills are being developed (Daba, Ejersa, & Aliyi, 2017; McCormick, Clark, & Raines, 2015; Wilson, 2016; Chen, Jones, & Xu, 2018). It is clear that group work needs students to cooperate and coordinate with each other for the sake to complete the task effectively within a given deadline since the marks are shared between group members (Balakrishnan, & Gan, 2016).

Othman & Murad (2015) also researched group work and found that individuals who work together tend to improve their thought processes while simultaneously maximizing their engagement, interaction, and communication with their peers. This optimal communication between group members appears to help in building trust and overcoming intimidation (Nguyen & Hudson, 2012; Nguyen, 2013).

Indeed, group members could fail to engage and interact with each other and likely withdraw from their groups if there is intimidation. In this respect, Mittelmeier et al. (2016) stated that the prevalence of the intimidating work environment could jeopardize the group work learning, instigate negative attitude among members, and impact the collaborative work (Nguyen, 2013). The integration of group work in course assignment by instructors enable students to overcome their social anxiety (Barkley, Major, & Cross, 2014), but also increase their participation and improves students' academic performance. Many teachers use group work for the inclusion of the minority, shy, introvert and less self-confident students in their classes because they tend to isolate themselves from other students and hence miss learning opportunities (Ellemers and Rink, 2016; Tharp, 2018; Nguyen, 2013; and Kassem, 2013). Therefore the teacher strategically assigns them to work with others on projects to ensure they are part of the learning community and no student is left behind. Research on group work with pre-service teachers has also shown the extent to which collaborative learning is efficient how useful collaborative work can be in terms of peer-support that was found to help overcome the teaching challenges and provide better insights of the problems encountered during practicum (Barahona, 2015; Barahona, 2017; Heo, & Mann, 2014; Rantavuori, Engeström, & Lipponen, 2016; and Goodnough et al., 2009). Indeed, using group work tends to reduce individual stress levels and help form a 3 supportive atmosphere (Heidorn et al., 2011; Nguyen, 2010; Nguyen & Hudson, 2012; Nguyen, 2013; Baeten & Simons, 2014; and Barahona, 2015). There is no question that in the teacher education context the collaboration where there is professional and emotional support yields to the development of the teaching identity (Beltman et al., 2015) as group mates are able to mentor each other through the provision of constructive pedagogical feedback (Dee, 2012). With this said, it is clear that group work discourages passive learning, competition, and isolation methods of learning, but it rather promotes active learning, cooperation, and communication (Daba, Ejersa, & Aliyi, 2017; and Maiden & Perry, 2011).

Though the benefits of group work are many, some issues related to its implementation have been observed by instructors and experienced by students. Daba, Ejersa & Aliyi (2017) argued that group work can be difficult to carry out when individuals are rigid and refuse or fail to engage in the assigned task. Such lack of commitment very often leads to detrimental outcomes such as delayed submissions, frustration and stress. Other issues relevant to group work include the dissatisfaction of some students when the teammates get the same marks irrespective of the participation and contribution to the group work. This puts both the talented, lazy, and dull students of a group at the same level (Nguyen, 2013). Furthermore, personal and social issues very often related to the lack of communication and negotiation skills have been found to affect negatively collaborative works between students (Porter, 2006; Mittelmeier et al., 2016).

Very similar to higher education institutions worldwide, University of Bahrain including Bahrain Teachers College (BTC) provides various avenues for the teacher candidates to improve their professional interactive skills through group works or projects. However, despite the strong believe that these types of group activities could be significant and valuable to students; there are issues that come with their practice that need particular attention. Therefore, this study explores (1) why EFL teacher candidates facing issues when they work together, (2) whether they have solutions for these issues, and (3) what according to them is an ideal group member. It is assumed that the study findings would assist in highlighting the pitfalls of the group work, improve EFL teacher candidates' group work ethics, and communication skills that are deemed paramount for their future teaching profession.

Methodology

Research Design

An action research has been used to answer the research questions. A survey of three open ended questions was used to gather data. A mixed methodology in data analysis was used to effectively represent and interpret the results (Darwin & Barahona, 2018). Answers were qualitatively analyzed then quantified into broad themes.

Recruited Participants

The participants of this study are 27 3rd year English teacher-candidates at BTC. Sample selection is purposeful because it helps us derive conclusive results for the target sample and content (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016). Another rationale for choosing this sample is that it has been reported that this batch tend to experience issues with working in groups and they have been purposefully chosen because of their potential to answer insightfully the three open ended questions.

Data Collection Tool

A survey of three main open-ended questions was administered to the students. These types of questions were administered to probe their individual feelings, experiences as well as perceptions concerning group work/project (Johnson & Christensen, 2019). These three questions are below:

• Questions 1: What are the most frequently experienced issues during your work in groups? Give examples and share your feelings and thoughts about these issues?
• Questions 2: How do you deal with these issues?
• Questions 3: What are the characteristics of an ideal group member?

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using a mixed research approach where qualitative data was quantified. Topics emerged from the analysis of the results obtained from the three open ended questions. These topics were later classified in broader themes and interpreted using quotes from students' perceptions to substantiate the quantitative results.

Results & Discussion

This section presents results and discusses content of each question separately.

Question 1: What are the most frequently experienced issues during your work in groups?
For this question, the analysis of EFL teacher candidates' responses indicated two main problems related to (1) lack of group work organizational skills and (2) lack of effective communication skills (Fig. 1).

Figure 1: Issues with Group Work
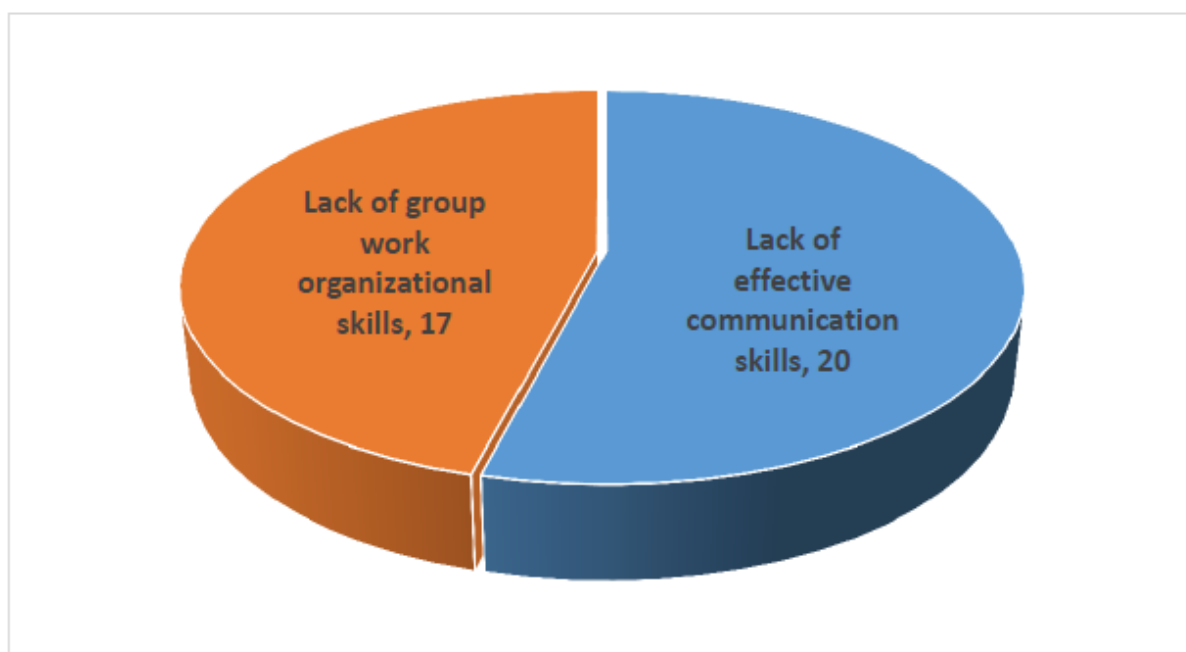
The 1st highest problem according to 20/27 respondents appears to be related to problems, and the 2nd significant issue as shown in **Fig. 1** is found to revolve around the lack of group organizational skills with 17/27 of the total replies. Let's have a closer look at what each of these problems entail for the EFL teacher candidates.

Lack of effective communication skills:

When teacher candidates were asked to provide concrete examples of the group issues they experience during their group projects or assignments that are related to the ineffective communication, they pointed at several themes including (1) *lack of negotiation skills*, (2) and (3) *lack of compromising skills*.

Concerning the **lack of negotiation skills**, some students reported that they are hesitant to ask for clarity in case of any confusion. One student expressed*, "I cannot understand what they are talking about, and I don't plan to ask as I will be judged"* (Student A). This clearly reflects the fear of being judged negatively by group members if a request has been made to understand unclear information. The fear to be judged has also been noted with students who don't dare to initiate topics or express themselves freely in front of their group mates like in the following quote: "*I hesitate in giving my own opinion…, it is because I fear that they might underestimate my opinion & quickly make a judgment without getting deeper into the matter"* (Student B).

As to the **lack of compromising skills**, EFL teacher candidates reported that sometimes when working together each group member wants to get things accomplished as per his/her desire. Ignoring others' opinions and justifications appears to cause problems in group work like in the following reaction of an EFL teacher candidate who did not like the non-willingness of her group mates to incorporate her suggestions: *"Why are we so stubborn?" … "I will keep quiet so we don't get into a fight… if not, we would always fight"* Student (C). Indeed, avoiding to compromise or find a common ground in a group discussion work can be detrimental to the type of a relationship that group mates should have to achieve the objectives of the assigned task as advanced by Saboonchi & Mahmoudi (2017). The following is another example of how interactional turns between group mates could be damaging to group work:

"Student (D): Let's try doing this instead?
Student (E): No, it won't work, I know.
Student (D): What do you know. Well if you don't like this idea, give us another one!
Student (E): I don't have any"

Student E further added that she felt "*…frustrated because she (Student D) was criticizing for the sake of criticizing.*" Student (D advanced that she did not mind criticism, but she added that this criticism should be constructive and based on solid reasoning which clearly is missing in this example. Student (D) argued that her preferred way to state an opinion should look like the following:

"Student (D): Let's try doing this instead?
Student (E): This is good; however, we have already started working on the 1st idea, we might not have enough time to complete it". (it: would be the suggested idea by Student (D))

Another good example on when group work becomes difficult for some EFL teacher candidates due to lack of compromising skills is below:

"Student (F): I think this can work here…
Student (G): No, it is not good
Student (F): but why?
Student (G): I don't like it, I will give you my idea, and you will apply it".

Student (F) said that: *"I felt bad and stupid because my colleague refused my idea without giving me a reason or a justification as to why it will not work."* She further added that she felt unworthy and hence did not contribute to group work after this incident. This is stated clearly in this quote: *"I thought that my ideas are useless and that I would not suggest anything again because she wanted her ideas only to be implemented."* Student (G) appears to be a dominant group member who undermines her group members' suggestions and ideas and imposes hers on them without the provision of any sensible reasonable persuasive arguments. Another interesting and similar experience reflecting how lack of compromising from some students could be problematic in having a trouble-free group work is below:

"*Student (H): What do you think of this idea; I think we can change what we have into something better.*
Student (I): No, we have worked hard on this, and we don't need to change it.
Student (H): I know, but I believe we can make it better.
Student (I): I said NO, keep it to yourself".

Student (H) expressed that she: *"…felt a bit sad and controlled"* because her *"…thoughts were not accepted and not even discussed."* Student (I) in this instance appears to be rude and with no negotiation skills. This is another emphasis on how valuing others opinions could be important to ensure a healthy ongoing and successful group work.

Lack of group organization skills

This is the 2nd significant issue experienced by EFL teacher candidates when they are tasked to work together in college. Teacher candidates identified this problem through different terms including: (1) the unfair distribution of group tasks, (2) power issues, (3) Lack of group rules and (4) lack of time management. With regard to ***inequality in distributing the group tasks*** between group members, it seems that there are different reasons:

a) the group leader tends to do most of the thinking based on his/her belief that others in his/her group are incompetent or by fear to re-do others assigned tasks at the last minute.
b) Bias in distributing the tasks to group members as reflected in one of the responses by Student (J): "friends with the leader get the subtask she wants at the expense of others…"
c) Group members are lazy and dependent on stronger hard working members. Indeed lack of committed group members to the assigned task might be conducive to organizational issues of group work like in the statement provided by Student (K): "most of the students want to get simple tasks that won't take much of their time." Another example highlighting this issue is advanced by Student (L):

"*Student (L): we must divide the work among us, each one will take part.*
Student (M): I will take the introduction."

In this example, it is clear that student (M) is looking to invest little effort or time to help other group members. *Student (L)* further expressed how she felt about this student reaction: *"I felt very bad and mad…. she is very selfish and a little bit like a free rider."*

Power issues were another factor that had a negative impact on group work. In this respect, some students expressed, *"two or more dominating group members make group work difficult".* It is clear that when stronger over-confident group members are in a group, they tend to minimize and underestimate others abilities to help in accomplishing the assigned task.

Lack of group rules is the third main problem mentioned by EFL teacher-candidates. Accordingly to student (N), the absence of group rules or the poor compliance of these rules by group members is very often at the core of disagreement and poor relationship of group members; she says: *"Most groups have no rules to follow… in case they have, members don't respect when working in groups".*

With the same degree of importance is the ***lack of time management***. Indeed, time issues were highly referred to by the participants especially with regard to the timely completion of the assigned work. The students were asked to share their experience upon which one student reported the following:

"*Student (Q): we need to finish the lexicon guide by tomorrow to work on the designs!*
Student (R): I did not have the time to do my work, I have other things to do, and I have a wedding tonight…. Why don't you do it yourself?".

Student (Q) further added that the answer of student (R) *"…made me agitated and angry."* It appears that student (R) is not taking seriously her role as an important contributor to the assigned group work. It is clear that this particular student is careless and does not respect the deadline of the task submission.

Her reasons of not having time to complete are not convincing and prove that there is a problem with prioritizing what she needs to do as well as managing her time and making a balance between her social life activities and her academic assignments. She also showed her complete reliance on student (Q) to do her work.

Questions 2: How do you deal with these issues?

This question was addressed to measure to what extent EFL teacher candidates are problem solvers and could manage to ensure a smooth ongoing of their group work by themselves. The main issues encountered in group work as listed and discussed earlier were dealt with as shown in **Fig 2** below using the following strategies: (1) reorganizing the group with 11/27 of replies, (2) addressing issues with group members with 10/27 and (3) having negative attitude with 5/27 of respondents.

Figure 2: Strategies to Overcome Group Issues
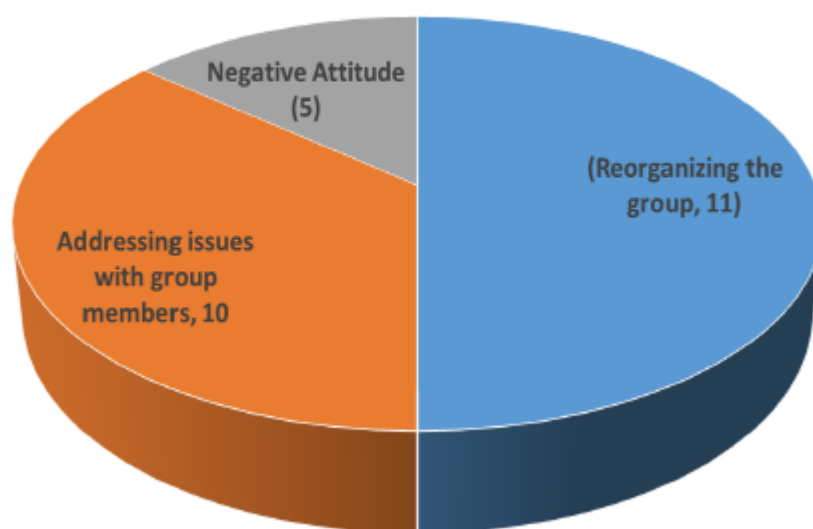
With ***reorganizing the group work***, the strategies included asking the students to vote when the task was being assigned. One student expressed: "*I liked it when we were asked to vote for a particular task or the member who is going to lead the group…*" This portrays that appointing a group leader and tasking small jobs for group members through voting is effective in solving or preventing group issues from happening. Setting deadlines for small different tasks is another useful strategy in group work that helped group members to accomplish and complete the group work effectively on time. This has been acknowledged by some respondents in the following quote: "*… used to get lazy when I knew that there is no timeline for the work assigned, but when the deadline is there, I make sure to submit it on*

time… actually, this motivates me to work". Another student said: "*Deadline is necessary as I am now able to manage my work accordingly.*" This indicated that managing time properly could help reduce the issues in group work. The most-reported strategy for reorganizing group work was to value others opinions and respect them, as expressed here: "*I believe that respecting each other's opinion and finding a mutual platform between the members has helped in resolving group issues.*"

Address the issues with group members is a strategy that some EFL teacher candidates use to sort out group issues when they are related to group members inadequate behavior. Some statements made by the students, in this respect, include: "*group leader makes sure to delegate tasks effectively… mostly with communication and coming to a common ground.*" The virtue of actively listening to others' problems and being patient have also been highlighted as effective strategies to address group work issues like in these statements: "*being patient, listen to others and try to find common ground is how I believe we overcame our group issues*", and "*I try to have a professional conversation with them, to make them understand that there are criteria that we need to follow to work well as a team*".

With this said, it is clear that a good number of EFL teacher candidates that they know how to address their group issues and work effectively with their group members for a successful accomplishment of the group work. However, there are some EFL teacher candidates who tend to react negatively to the issues they experience in their group work.

Indeed, *negative attitudes* have been noted from EFL teacher candidates with regard to how they usually deal with group issues. One of these negative attitudes is illustrated in the following statement: "… *carry out task of others to get the work done, which is not right on the part of others"*. This shows that the student in question tends to do others work instead of finding ways to get those free-riders on task.

Questions 3: What are the characteristics of an ideal group member?

This is third open-ended question that EFL teacher candidates had to answer. Their responses indicated that an ideal group member should be responsible, a team player, respectful, flexible, punctual, and honest **(Further details are in Fig.3 below)**.

Figure 3: Characteristics of an Ideal Group Member
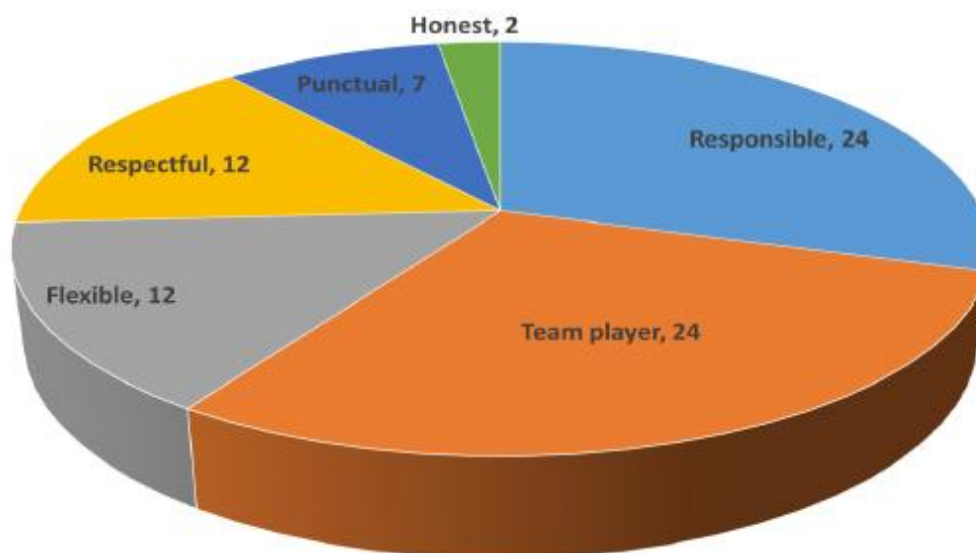
24/27 of the total responses from EFL teacher candidates believe that an ideal group member should be *responsible* which entail someone who is accountable to the assigned task, performs the work with quality and acknowledges any flaws in one's work. Being responsible for them also means asking for help and feedback from group members not only taking over the whole task of completing the joint work. The same number of responses (24/27) emphasized the importance of being a *team player* to work in groups; this characteristic is important because it ensures trouble free discussion of conflicting ideas from varied personalities. Several studies have supported this findings including the ones LaBeouf, Griffith, & Roberts, 2016; and Malmberg et al., 2015. *Being flexible* is another desired trait in an ideal group member with 12/27 responses. EFL teacher candidates value a group member who is flexible rather than rigid especially in embracing others opinions and suggestions. The same number of replies has been found with *being respectful*. EFL teacher candidates find it worthy that group members are appreciate each other's opinions and express and express disagreement with the use of good manners, appropriate language and tone. The last personality trait that can be included in this discussion is *being punctual* i.e. be on time either for meetings and in submitting individually assigned works. In this respect, one student stated: "*Being punctual is extremely necessary as it helps save time and gets work done in a timely manner."*

Conclusion:

This research was carried out to shed light on: (1) issues EFL teacher candidates are experiencing during their group work, (2) whether these students know how to solve those issues and (3) what, according to them, is an ideal group member. The analysis of data revealed that these EFL teacher candidates have issues with communication and group organization.

The poor communication EFL teacher candidates have during their group discussion appears to stem from their lack of negotiation and compromising skills. When these students were asked if they know how to solve these issues, some of these students have reported that knew exactly what to do to ensure a trouble-free group work. They suggested (1) addressing issues with group members, (2) negotiating solutions until a common ground is reached, (3) reorganizing group work through setting deadlines and group rules from the beginning, and (4) fairly distributing subtasks between group members. For the third enquiry, the findings indicated that most EFL teacher candidates view an ideal group member should be responsible and a team player. The message drawn from this research emphasized that EFL teacher candidates should learn and understand the essence behind a successful group work, try to avoid the negative attitudes that tend to jeopardize any joint effort, and act immediately on arising group issues to ensure a trouble-free group work. College should intervene with teaching these students how to collaborate successfully which a particular emphasis on developing and harnessing negotiation and compromising skills.

Limitations of the study:

The present study has certain limitations such as sample size. A bigger sample size across different specializations in College would have yielded to better results and understanding about the issues of group work in this particular geographical region. Involving instructors in this kind of research would not only have enlightened more areas of concern with regard to group work but also provided constructive remedial suggestions to improve this practice and prepare EFL teacher candidates for their future careers where there endless situations where they have to negotiate and compromise successfully and with ease.

Acknowledgment

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