Improving the attendance rate of students with mental disabilities in language teaching: A case study of Japanese

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate if it is possible to improve the attendance rate of undergraduate students with mental disabilities. This paper begins by reviewing attendance and learning from long- versus short-term concepts. The participants included 12 students with mental disabilities who studied Japanese at a British university in the South East of England in the 2018/2019 and 2019/20 academic years. The study used mixed methods using quantitative students' attendance rates and student' written and verbal comments. Data analysis for attendance rates were conducted by calculation and for student' written and verbal comments we used qualitative data analysis. The results showed that the average attendance rate over the years and the data also showed positive results. The study concludes that it is possible to improve the attendance rates of students with mental disabilities. This study may be of interest to anyone who is involved with and support students with mental disabilities.

Keywords: Attendance, higher education, Japanese, language learning, students, mental disabilities.

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1. Introduction

The purpose of this study is to find out if it is possible to improve the attendance rate of Japanese language classes which include students with mental disabilities. In particular, the study focuses on students learning Japanese as a foreign language. Students with mental disabilities are referred to as RAs in this paper, which will be defined next.

1.1. Definition of RA

According to Hughes and Spanner (2019), there are three terms related to students' mental disabilities: mental health, mental illness and mental health illness or poor mental health. Mental health refers to 'a full spectrum of experience from good mental health to mental illness' (Hughes & Spanner, 2019, p. 9). Mental illness is explained as 'a condition and experience, involving thoughts, feelings, symptoms and/or behaviours, that causes distress and reduces functioning, impacting negatively on an individual's day to day experience, and which may receive or be eligible to receive a clinical diagnosis' (Hughes & Spanner, 2019, p. 9). Mental health problems or poor mental health refers to 'a broader range of individuals experiencing levels of psychological distress beyond normal experience and beyond their current ability to effectively manage. It should be noted that this term includes both those who experience mental illness and those who experiences a fall below this threshold, whose mental health is not good' (Hughes & Spanner, 2019, p. 9).

To explain the definition of RAs in this study to align with the above three terms, the degree of RA encompasses wide ranges from very severe to mild. RAs in this study include students who have been admitted to a psychological hospital (very severe) while some could attend classes (mild). Therefore, based on the current best practice, the definition of RAs seems to align with a combination of 'mental illness' and 'mental health illness or poor mental health'.

1.2. RA and Japanese language teaching

The number of RAs in Japanese language teaching has been increasing yearly and the researcher taught a total of 24 RA status students who were registered as RA at the University Student Support Unit (SSU) between 2017/18 and 2019/20. Among the 24 includes students who suffer from 'depression and anxiety' to a few students who were admitted to a psychological hospital. These students usually suffer from combined mental health issues such as most typical 'depression and anxiety', 'depression, anxiety and OCD', 'depression, anxiety and ADD', 'anxiety and OCD' and 'dyslexia and dyspraxia'. It should be noted that 'type 1 diabetes' is also included as RAs as type 1 diabetes also affects mental health with regard to students' motivation, time management and concentration (University SSU).

1.3. Statement of the problem

Attendance is associated with academic success as an indicator of academic engagement, performance and retention (Romer, 1993; Smith & Beggs, 2003). On the other hand, absenteeism is considered as a failure (Barlow & Fleischer, 2011) related to drop out (Beggs & Smith, 2002). Therefore, attendance is considered important in language teaching and learning (especially speaking and listening) by language teachers. The majority of language teachers tend to assume students' poor attendance as an indicator for students' motivation to learn languages. In the 2018/19 academic year, the researcher was teaching a class where 7 out of 13 students (more than half of the class) had mental disabilities and poor attendance. The researcher noticed the poor attendance rate and decided to make an inquiry.

1.4. Theoretical framework

Before how long- versus short-term orientation and students' attendance are related in the next section, the idea of the long- versus short-term dimension is used as a theoretical framework of this study. Long- versus short-term dimension in Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov's (2010) cultural taxonomy was used as the basis of this study. Values of long-term orientation are 'adaptation of tradition to a modern context, large savings quota, funds available for investment, perseverance towards slow results, respect for social and status obligations within limits, thrift, and being sparing with resources' (Table 7.2 in Hofstede, 1991, p. 173). Values associated with short-term orientation are 'respect for traditions, small savings quota and little money for investment, quick results expected, respect for social and status obligations regardless of cost, social pressure to 'keep up with the Jones's even if it means overspending' (Table 7.2 in Hofstede, 1991, p. 173).

Related to long- versus short-term orientation, there are two types of students' attendance: full/regular attendance and irregular/poor/non-attendance. Full/regular attendance may belong to long-term orientation and irregular/poor/non-attendance may be considered short-term orientation. However, some reasons for irregular/poor/non-attendance include unavoidable circumstances such as family emergencies, illness and virtual learning environment (Friedman, Rodriguez & McComb, 2001; Gysbers, Johnston, Hancock & Denyer, 2011), which makes it difficult to claim that irregular/poor/non-attendance as short-term orientations. Furthermore, personal attributes (i.e., conscientiousness, diligence, achievement and motivation) and perceived control over a task and perceived difficulty (Paisey & Paisey, 2003), confidence and self-esteem (Cassidy & Eachus, 2000; Dweck, 1999) also influence long-term and short-term orientations.

1.5. Significance of the study

There are numerous researches conducted regarding undergraduate students' attendance rates; however, the majority of them focus on neurotypical students' attendance rates. The significance of this study is attendance rate including RAs.

1.6. Limitation of the study

The results of the study could be due to a number of factors, particularly the limitations. The main limitation of this study was the low number of participants. Twelve is a small sample size. It was not feasible to increase the total number of participants, as this was the maximum number of students available in the context of the study. This limits the generalisability of the conclusion drawn from the results. Nonetheless, it was useful to find the results on the specific sample population.

2. Review of the literature

Before the discussion of the long- versus short-term orientation of attendance, the following two quotes show the importance of students' class attendance in language learning:

1. 'Learning is a more or less permanent change in behaviour potential that occurs as a result of practice' (Mikulas, 1977, p. xiii);
2. 'Behaviour is facilitated the understanding and retention of academic material, so behavioural changes is also influential to the understanding and retention of academic material' (Crede, Roch & Kieszezynka, 2010, p. 273).

Quote 1 suggests that language learning is prior to students' behavioural changes (i.e., attending classes), whereas quote 2 suggests that students' behavioural changes (i.e., attendance) can lead to language learning.

2.1. Attendance of students with long-term orientation culture

Students' attendance has long- versus short-term orientations, but there are two types of learning: 1) instant learning (short term) and 2) after a time delay learning (long term) (Lumby, 2011). Those from long-term orientation are familiar with 2) after a time delay learning (long-term) learning. The ultimate goal of undergraduate students who adopt long-term orientation is to obtain better employment after graduation. These students usually attend classes consistently, which also benefits their cognitive ability. Consistent class attendance is a distributed practice which allows students to get repeated and extensive contact with information and repeated practice of skills.

Rote learning is one of the common in language teaching approaches used in long-term orientation education. The language teachers believe learners' consistent speaking practice on memorised conversations or texts will help students to make sense 'after a time delay' (long term). It also helps students to acquire other skills such as students' self-regulating, self-efficacy and time management. For example, if a student encounters interference with their other non-language coursework and needs to complete their academic commitment, s/he may need to estimate how well s/he is doing on that particular course and decide to prioritise by dropping or skipping one class in order to prepare better for another. In other words, this is self-efficacy and time management skills. According to psychology studies, it is well-known that effective students can regulate their own learning, which is referred as self-regulate. In language teaching context, it means that students are able to control their own language learning and take responsibility. It is important that students are given choices in their language learning to make decisions, which give them a sense of responsibility.

Those who adopt long-term orientation have long-term views, i.e., they can delay gratification and make sustained efforts towards slow results, i.e., persistence, perseverance, patience, self-discipline (Hofstede et al., 2010) and self-regulation (Blerkom, 1992). Some cultures hold the belief that students should learn to persevere. To give an example, this is demonstrated by their educational system where students have to study all subjects to completion them, regardless of their preferences. Thus, the majority of students may find studying uninteresting. However, school, family and society emphasise the importance of making effort to persevere during the course whatever the case. This education system ensures that all students are immersed in this educational value, which is important to increase overall consistency of keeping citizens' perseverance from generation to generation.

2.2. Attendance of students with short-term orientation culture

Students with short-term orientation believe that 'effort should produce quick results' and they have a 'tendency to leave studying to the last minute' and 'cramming for exams to attempt to compensate for poor attendance'. The act of attending class is a largely volitional behaviour with short-term costs and likely long-term benefits (Crede et al., 2010). However, those who adopt short-term orientation expect quick results, rewards by abilities (use of rewards/punishment) and are influenced by social pressure to 'keep up with Joneses' (Hofstede et al., 2010). Students with short-term orientation tend to believe that an individual class is unrelated to their future career. This is usually demonstrated by the students' absenteeism. The reasons for students consist of class boredom, lack of sleep, a dislike for either the class or the lecturer, transportation problems, engagement in part-time work (Friedman et al., 2001; Kirby & McElroy, 2003), bad weather (Moore, Armstrong & Pearson, 2008), the time of the day of lecture time (Devadoss & Foltz, 1996), the duration of lecture time (Devadoss & Foltz, 1996) and the days of the week of lecture time (Marburger, 2001). Social pressure 'to keep up with the Joneses' is demonstrated by students' preference for 'socialisation over study' (Kassarnig, Bjerre-Nielsen, Mones, Lehmann & Lassen, 2017). These reasons are the results of neurotypical students.

Students with mental disability may wish to attend but are unable to attend classes consistently and unable to get the benefit of repeated and extensive contact with information and repeated practice of skills. In other words, students with mental health may not adopt short-term orientation;

however, anxiety and/or depression condition may prevent them from attending classes regularly due to panic attacks, anxiety and/or depression.

The two types of learning (instant learning [short term] and after a time delay learning [long term] [Lumby, 2011]) have been discussed earlier, but short-term learners focus on short-term outcomes and prefer 'instant' learning. The examples of instant learning includes physical activity, genuine exploration and discovery is considered intimately linked to learning experience in the present (Lumby, 2011).

It raises questions whether students from short-term cultures achieve perseverance in learning. The short-term educational system encourages students to study what they like. Students with short-term orientation may not need to go through perseverance and make effort to study subjects as they are not forced to study subject if they do not wish to study. It seems that students from short-term cultures achieve perseverance differently from long-term orientation students. Students with short-term orientation achieve persistence indirectly using motivation and enjoyment. According to Lumby (2011), learning is contingent on willingness to engage and persist, which starts with motivation followed by enjoyment experience which results in persistence. If a student with short-term orientation likes studying a language, they are more likely to study the language and enjoy learning it, which makes them persistent in the long term. This suggests that students of both long- and short-term orientations can achieve the same goal of 'learning as making sense' (Watkins, 2005), where they go through cognitive abilities such as 'to process, integrate and remember the material' (Humphreys, 1979).

To conclude the literature review, it is shown how language learning, attendance and long- versus short-term culture are interrelated. Students with mental disability tend to have poor attendances and may be considered and classified in the short-term culture. This study seeks to investigate if students have a mental disability, then their attendance is and will be always poor and cannot be improved. The study uses language teacher's teaching style as a factor to test the experimental classes.

3. Methods and materials

3.1. Research design

This study used a mixed method design consisting of two datasets: students' attendance rates and students' written and verbal comments. The attendance rates provided quantitative data and some students' comments provided qualitative data. To see if the attendance rates were enhanced, experimental classes which used psychological concepts were conducted for one semester in 2019. This study uses an experimental design as a fixed design (Robson, 2002).

3.2. Participants

The participants were RA students who studied Japanese through an Institution Wide Language Program at a British university in the Southeast of England during the 2018/19 and 2019/20 academic years. There was a total of 12 RAs (4 males and 8 females). The participants comprised foundation year and first-year students. Foundation year programmes offer 'unqualified people to upgrade their knowledge sufficiently to qualify them to enter tertiary programmes' (Fraser et al, 1990, p. 85). Therefore, the clear difference is the duration which the foundation year and the first-year students study: the foundation year studies for 4 years and the first year studies for 3 years.

In addition to foundation year and first year, students study three levels of Japanese: *ab initio*, intermediate and advanced Japanese in context. *Ab initio* module is for those who have no previous knowledge of the Japanese language, which occupies the largest number of students. Those who have completed each level can study in the next higher levels (i.e., intermediate and advanced Japanese in

context) as *ab initio* is lowest level and Japanese in context is the most advanced level. As two sets of quantitative and qualitative data (i.e., 1. attendance rate and 2. students' email and verbal comments) involved with this study, the participants of each data differ. The details on the participants are explained below.

3.2.1. Participants of the attendance rate data

The total number of participants for 2018/19 and 2019/20 was 10 (7 females and 3 males in Table 1). The breakdown of the 10 participants was 7 RAs (5 females and 2 males) in 2018/19 and 3 RAs (2 females and 1 male) in 2019/20. Ten RAs were all 18 years old and all British nationals. They all studied the *ab initio* modules.

Table 1. Details of RAs in 2018/19 and 2019/20

Mental disability	2018/19		2019/20	
	F	*M*	*F*	*M*
Dyslexia and dyspraxia	1	0	0	1
Anxiety and depression	0	1	0	0
Anxiety with depression	0	1	0	0
Depression and anxiety	1	0	0	0
Autism spectrum and OCD	1	0	0	0
Depression, anxiety and OCD	1	0	0	0
Autism spectrum condition	1	0	0	0
Anxiety	0	0	1	0
Type 1 diabetes *According to the University's SSU, type 1 diabetes affects mental health with regard to the students' motivation, time management and concentration.	0	0	1	0
Subtotal RAs	5	2	2	1
Grand total RAs	7		3	

3.2.2. Participants of written or verbal comments

The total number of participants was two (one female and one male in Table 2), who were both undisclosed RAs: one participant studied in an advanced and the other in 'Japanese in context' module in 2019/20. Undisclosed RAs refer to students who do not wish to disclose that they have mental health issues and do not wish to register with SSU to obtain RA status.

Table 2. Details of RAs in 2018/19 and 2019/20

Mental disability	2019/20		Nationality	Age
	F	*M*		
Asperger's syndrome (undisclosed RA)	1	0	British	21
Undisclosed RA	0	1	Hong Kong	21
Subtotal RAs	1	1		
Grand total RAs	2			

3.3. Collected data

1. Attendance rate

The university registers which the researcher recorded for both the autumn and spring terms of 2018/19 and 2019/20 were used to calculate attendance rates manually.

2. Undisclosed RA students' written and verbal comments

It comprised two evidences: an undisclosed RA student's email (written) and another undisclosed RA student's verbal comments confessing of mental health problems.

3.4. Data collection procedure

As there were two datasets, the data collection process was conducted in two stages. The first stage involved collecting attendance rates and the second stage involved collecting quantitative data. Overall, the process took 6 months.

3.4.1. Attendance rates

Using the university registers, which the researcher recorded for the autumn and spring terms of 2018/19 and 2019/20, the researcher first calculated each student's attendance per term. After this, the average was calculated by each student's attendance rate which gives either the autumn or spring term average attendance rate. These were all processed by manual calculation for both autumn and spring terms of 2018/19 and 2019/20.

3.4.2. Qualitative data

An undisclosed RA student's written (i.e., student's email) and an undisclosed RA students' verbal comments were obtained after completing the first stage. An undisclosed RA student's email which confessed his mental health issue was obtained from numerous correspondences with the student during the spring term in 2019/20. During the class in the spring term 2019/20, another undisclosed RA student's comments confessing of mental health problems were obtained.

3.5. Experimental Japanese classes: principles of language teaching

Three RA students in 2019/20 were exposed to experimental classes which combined three psychological concepts (perceived competence, autonomy and a sense of belonging) for 3 months in the spring term of 2019. Firstly, perceived competence was achieved by giving students 'challenging tasks' that are usually one step beyond their current skills so that they could develop to cope with the skills. The degree of 'challenging task' is very important in language teaching as if students find the task/level too difficult, they give up and lose motivation to learn. If students find the task/level too easy, they may also lose interest and also lose motivation. Therefore, the researcher set and gave the optimum challenging task level for the students. In addition, the researcher made a clear connection between the previous lesson and the new learning content for students to perceived competence. Lastly, students were encouraged to 'participate' in class, especially in the form of voluntary verbal participation. Not only voluntarily verbal participation, the researcher also used 'turn-taking' to give all students an opportunity to participate in the class.

To encourage students' participation and also their continued participation, the following four points to a supportive learning environment were included in the experimental class: i) where students feel comfortable asking questions in class; ii) where the students' ideas and opinions are welcomed, valued and seen helpful and effective community members; iii) where students do not feel ridiculed or punished for providing the wrong answers; and iv) the use of teacher's instructions such as appropriate praises, encouraging words in front of other students.

Secondly, autonomy was achieved by 'practice sheets' and giving students choices and opportunities for decision-making. The purpose of 'practice sheets' was to remember the information (e.g., vocabulary) without any deadline and pressure on the students. The practice sheets were not checked by the teacher. Instead, the students checked the answers by themselves using textbooks, which afforded them a reflective process. Going through the reflective process, students were expected to feel autonomy, but at the same time it was also expected that autonomy shifts responsibility of learning from the teacher to the students. As the responsibility of learning has shifted

to the students themselves, students do not feel that they were not compared with other students. Comparison was only made between the students' previous work and the students' current performance. The teacher played the role of a facilitator by monitoring students' individual progress and gave positive feedback.

Autonomy was also achieved by providing students with opportunities for autonomous decision-making which is claimed to foster the development of positive belief about personal autonomy and competence (Ryan & Powelson, 1991). The researcher, who also doubled as the teacher, provided choices and encouraged students to make decisions during the class so that students felt autonomy. For example, the students were asked which task they wished to do first or which day of the week they wished to have a formative assessment, etc. Lastly, a sense of belonging was achieved by the use of i) pair work and ii) reciprocal teaching which included collaborative learning and group learning as these allow students' interactions.

4. Data analysis

1. Attendance rates

As individual student's attendance rate is not offered in the university's register, the researcher calculated each student's attendance rate (descriptive statistics) (i.e., the average percentage of each student's total number of attendance rate out of either 11 classes for the autumn and spring term of 2019/20 or 12 classes for the autumn and spring term of 2018/19) in the university register.

2. Students' written and verbal comments

Considering either written or verbal form of the undisclosed RA students' confession on their mental health issues to the researcher as successful evidence of a trusting relationship between the researcher and the student, undisclosed RA students' written and verbal comments were analysed. As the qualitative data includes students' perception, views regarding on how they were taught, the data analysis methods mainly focused on building a logical chain of evidence (Miles & Huberman, 1994) to determine if the experimental classes may have impact on students with mental disabilities.

5. Results and discussion

5.1. Quantitative results: attendance rate

Figure 1 shows both 2018/19 and 2019/20 attendance rates using two graphs which enables visually comparing them to see if the experimental classes have made any difference between 2018/19 and 2019/20.
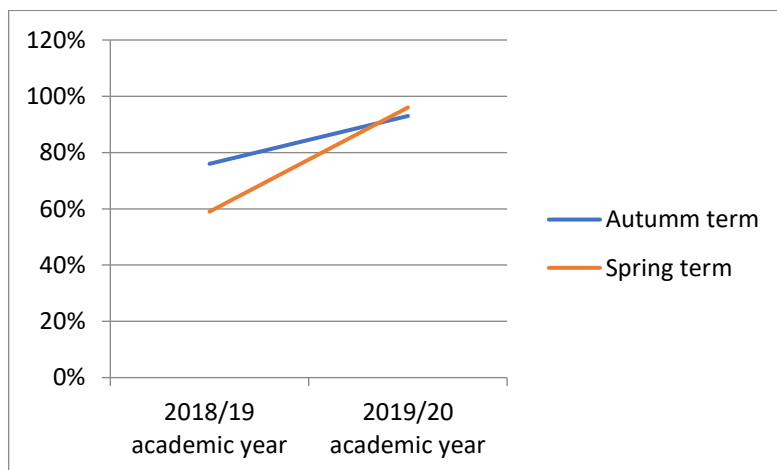

Figure 1. Attendance rates in autumn term 2019/20 and spring term 2019/20

Figure 1 shows the attendance rates in 2018/19 and 2019/20. The attendance rates for the autumn term 2018/19 was 76% (15 students which include 6 RAs) and that of the spring term was 59% (13 students which includes 7 RAs). This makes the average attendance for 2018/19 academic year as 67.5%. The researcher is aware that the spring term attendance rate usually goes down as students get used to the classes compared to the autumn term when all the students are new to Japanese language learning.

The attendance rate for the spring term 2019/20 was 93% (15 students which include 4 RAs) and that of the spring term was 96% (13 students which includes 3 RAs). This makes the average attendance for 2019/20 academic year as 95%. Spring term's 96% attendance rate was unexpected, observing from the 2018/19 spring term attendance rate. In addition, the average student's attendance rate for 2019/20 was 95%, which makes it possible to say that the experimental classes worked well for the students. It is often mentioned about RAs' low attendance, but *ab initio* 2019/20 had good average attendance (95%), although it includes three RAs. The majority of the students informed of their absence prior to the class if they know that they will be absent. It should be noted as the university register differentiates between absence without students' prior notification and absence with students' prior notification. The absences with students' prior notification are considered better than the other.

Comparing the attendance rates of the autumn and spring terms of 2018/19 and 2019/20, i.e., before (76% and 67.5%) and after (93% and 95%) the experimental classes, it is clear that the positive impact and success of experimental classes. This quantitative data indicates researchers' teaching influenced to students' attendance rates. The impact of experimental classes will be examined using quantitative data in the next section.

5.2. Qualitative results

There are two qualitative data which undisclosed RAs who confessed their disabilities in class or by an email.

5.2.1. Qualitative data 1
In the advanced module in the 2019/20 academic year, there were six students, three of whom were RAs: one RA (anxiety and depression) and two undisclosed RAs. One of the undisclosed RA students confessed their disability (Asperger's syndrome) during a class discussion, which had not been disclosed in the Student Support Document for the last 2 years. The student has significantly improved from the autumn term to the spring term and is now able to contribute voluntarily with verbal participation, which was nearly impossible in the spring term. Additionally, the researcher has accommodated their assessment requests to do individual one-to-one oral examination on two separate dates and times to suit them in addition to the official assessment day.

5.2.2. Qualitative data 2
In the 'Japanese in context' module in 2019/20, one undisclosed RA student confessed their disability (depression) by email. This condition has not been disclosed in the Student Support Document for the last 2 years. This module has only one student so the researcher has been teaching on a one-to-one basis. This student wrote in an email that the student enjoys the benefit of one-to-one teaching in the email as follows:

'Dear Junko, My apology to my very bad attendance since this year. I know that attendance is very important for language learning especially in Japanese that I don't have very much chance to speak and practice. This year, I feel very stressed and depressed about going to uni (meaning university), not because of I'm the only one student in class but in every subjects. And I actually enjoy the benefits of being one to one teaching. It's my personal problem that I have poor attendance. I am trying to solve it and I will improve my attendance and keep all the work done'.

The two qualitative data share the same positive students' feedback. Both students revealed their mental health issues to the researcher: in Data 1, the students revealed to all classmates and the student in Data 2 revealed to the researcher privately by email. The researcher considers that revealing their mental health needs courage and trust and the researcher was able to earn the students' trust.

6. Discussion

A wealth of empirical evidence supports that attendance is an important facilitator of academic success in various disciplines of different higher education institutions across the countries. Attendance rates in the previous studies range between 81.5% (Marburger, 2001) and 75% (Friedman et al., 2001) but as low as 60% (Romer, 1993) and the lowest ranging between 30% and 41% (Moore et al., 2003). 100% attendance was never seen (Davis, Hodgson & Macaulay, 2012). However, these results assume that all students are neurotypical.

For this reason, the results of this study are striking as they demonstrate successful enhanced attendance rates after the experimental classes. The results show that it was possible to increase the attendance rate to 95% for a class.

7. Conclusion, recommendations and further study

The purpose of this study was to examine if it is possible to improve the attendance rate of a Japanese language class which includes students with mental disabilities. The results of this study show that the class which includes RAs achieved a higher attendance rate despite the general assumption that the attendance rates of a class which include RAs are considered to be low.

Recommendations include future research with larger sample of similar investigation to build knowledge related to this study. Furthermore, it is also recommended to develop university attendance register software programme which will calculate and analyse individual attendance rate would contribute not only for the students and language teachers but also for attendance studies to initiate a new strand of attendance studies literature.

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