Achievement or proficiency? Just getting a pass is enough!

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Abstract

This paper discusses about the problems and limitations of the engineering students in gaining achievement and proficiency in language exams and realia. As the students aim at mere passing the subject, they are not able to develop proficiency to communicate in real situations. Due to the academic pressure in their disciplinary studies, engineering students pay little contribution for enhancing linguistic and communication skills. Qualitative ethnography research is conducted to understand the practical difficulties and learning experiences of the students. It is found that the motivation level of the students is low as far as language learning is concerned. The present research implies on the use of cognitive knowledge, discursive techniques and peer interaction in open tasks and suggests how it aids them to display better performances in both achievement and proficiency tests.

Keywords: Achievement, communicative competency, language performance, language proficiency, language testing, open tasks.

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1. Introduction

Language teachers face a role of insurgency as they doubt what really to do in the English classroom. They are entrusted with the two great jobs in academics—one is to produce 100% results in the exam and the next is to make the student to competently communicate in English. The former is based on achievement tests with a valid notion of measuring structural and functional components prescribed in the course (Cummins, 1984; Davies, 1991), and the latter is oriented towards developing discursive skills with adequate sociocultural and strategic competence (Stern, 1983). In this context, do the prescribed academic syllabus and evaluation processes aim at testing achievement or proficiency? Do the pedagogical syllabus really targets on promoting language proficiency and communicative competency? Do teachers need to promote achievement oriented learning for promoting academic results? Do students become proficient through achievement tests? Do achievement and proficiency tests can be simultaneously undertaken with the same syllabus content and instructional practices? How far the language faculty can do justice in their job and face the challenges of real classroom culture? These are the questions often posed in the academic circles but little achieved in solving the above problems.

The critical role of the language teachers and the students in facing these enquiries is accommodated with the factors affecting syllabus, instructional practices, testing and evaluation (Diffey, 1992). The students are found to get pass in the examinations but they are not able to competently communicate in English (Man-fat Wu, 2008). It is obviously known that the academic syllabus is partially covered with the linguistic and psychological components of proficiency (Cummins, 1984). Achievement tests are based on content validity and proficient tests are based on predictive and construct validity (Davies, 1991). Content analysis features a major component in distributing the whole subject into segregated areas of knowledge. Just by familiarising the given gist of structural content one should not do an injustice of saying that they have understood the whole subject. It is a matter of utter disgust and dishonest on the part of a teacher's responsibility of mere completing the syllabus and the students' aim to just get passed in the examination. The teachers need to be content specific for making the students to achieve in exams (Hirsh, 2007), and also, they need to be very predictive to prompt the students to develop their language and cognitive skills for real communication. How far the students are able to apply their learned knowledge of grammar and vocabulary in real communication is found to be an unresolved issue. This paper examines when the students are not seriously learning, how far they can achieve in language tests and confidently perform in real communication.

2. Research question

- How students can perform better in both achievement and proficiency tests?

The above question ponders on analysing students' limited English proficiency and its effect on academic progress and social communication.

3. Review of literature

It is more appropriate to follow the distinction framed by Davies (1991) on achievement as specific syllabus-based learning of a single program on some proficiency construct; and proficiency as general learning in some absolute sense. Black (1991, 10) states, 'Teaching models designed for general communicative competence do not necessarily work well for academic competence'. The specific content validity of achievement tests do not help to gain general proficiency or competency. Davies (1991, 6) distinguishes '... an achievement test of the memorisation of a 10 item vocabulary test and a

proficiency test of the whole of the language. ... the more explicit the specification of learning, the more achievement-like ... The less explicit the more proficiency-like the test'. It can be recognised that achievement tests validate explicit learning, while proficiency tests rest on implicit learning. It can be inferred that achievement tests are influenced by the direct strategies like memory, cognitive and compensation and proficiency tests are subjected with the indirect strategies like metacognitive, affective and social (Oxford, 1990). Thus, proficient tests are based on metacognitive and metalinguistic skills and it can be better practised through implicit learning (Leaver & Shekhtman, 2002; Song, 2005).

Stern (1983) claims that achievement and proficiency tests have been developed to measure and assess the outcome of learning process. Until 1960's, psychometric tests have been previously applied to test language learning. Lado (1961, cited in Stern, 1983) recognised that language testing needs to include linguistic components along with psychometric aspects. Oller (1979, cited in Stern, 1983) emphasised on using grammar and vocabulary to test the structural components of speech. Cummins (1979, 1980, cited in Stern 1983) stipulates that the standardised tests partially measures proficiency. Ollers' unitary language proficiency tests (Oller, 1975), MLA Cooperative Tests or the IEA French Tests (Carroll, 1975) and the IEA English Tests (Leevis & Massad, 1975) implies on promoting linguistic competence and concerns on just testing the content prescribed in the school/university syllabus (cited in Stern, 1983).

Discrete point tests and Oller's global integrative tests are essentially achievement-based tests as they measure linguistic competence but not the actual communicative performance of the students (Carroll, 1980; Morrow, 1979; Rea, 1978 cited in Weir, 1988). Achievement-based tests are much concerned with the discrete items of grammar and vocabulary and do not promote pragmatic competence skills (Weir, 1988). As discourse, sociolinguistic and strategic competency is not developed through achievement tests; they are not aimed at measuring overall proficiency of the students (Morrow, 1979). Stern (1983) claims, 'proficiency' as the core 'product variable' and the 'result' of language learning besides affective traits and unique style of expression gained as an outcome of learning. With the advent of communicative approaches to language testing, it is rigorously felt that language testing needs to assess proficiency in terms of communicative performance, the ability to use language in any real situation. Communicative language tests are more performance-based tests that aims at evaluating the quality and effectiveness of the actual performances in a specific context (Moller, 1981b, cited in Weir, 1988). The core concept of communicative paradigm is the emphasis on the use of language rather than the usage and this is reflected in both the teaching and testing of language. It evokes prime distinction of what and how to evaluate the knowledge and ability of the students in terms of their achievement and performance.

Carroll (1968, cited in Stern 1983) claimed language and communicative performance can be tested through proficiency tests. The specifications of proficiency tests are visualised through the aspects of both linguistic competence and linguistic performance. Carroll (1979, cited in Stern, 1983) views proficiency in terms of language components grammar, lexis, phonology and orthography with the four language skills. This multiple categories are conceptualised with the linguistic and behavioural aspects of language and skills. Cummins (1984) conceptualises proficiency with a multi-dimensional approach and justifies its specified role in terms of grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse and strategic influences in different contexts. Canale and Swain's (1980) distinction of communicative competence with grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse and strategic dimensions has been widely accepted and practised.

Maleki & Zangani (2007) asserts English language proficiency is positively correlated with academic achievement. But, the dichotomy between achievement and proficiency tests exist for the want of cognitive processing of language, informative content and performance. English language proficiency determines academic achievement and urges ESL learners to be proficient in both language and

communication (Fakeye & Ogunsiji, 2009; Feast, 2002). The students with higher proficiency are able to perform much better in writing than speaking. Extra time, dictionaries, glossary and customised dictionary, oral administration of tests are some of the accommodations that can be employed for developing performance of English language learners (Abedi, Hofstetter & Lord, 2004). Gil and Bardack (2010, cited in McLaughlin, 1992) report that oral assessment is not the only criteria for examining academic progress and determining English proficiency**.** Testing any single skill or any structural content will not imply for gaining proficiency or to achieve academic progress.

Davies (1978, cited in Weir, 1988, 1) considered language tests to be a combination of both analytical and integrative and recognises that 'no test could be wholly analytical or integrative'. This view can be broadly accepted, but when it comes to the realm of competency-based testing, it actually differs as testing language skills for specific communication purposes cannot be done with mere objectives of gaining knowledge of structures or being capable enough to communicate only in certain situations. Bachman (1981) insists on conducting needs analysis and specification of objectives for understanding the purpose of testing and evaluation. Chudowsky & Chudowsky (2010) reflects that due to language barrier, test may not accurately reflect the understanding and the ability of the students. They need to be tested in terms of language skills and content knowledge (Abedi, 2010).

4. The present study

4.1. Context and course of the study

This research study is conducted at a tertiary level technical institution in Place. In Place, higher education policy substantiates the view to adopt standard language system and to attain proficiency through achievement tests. With their entry in the first year of the study, engineering students are given much awareness on the global use of English in academics, professional and technical contexts. Engineering students learn Technical English as the part of their university-based curriculum to develop communicative competence. Though Technical English course is labelled with EAP, its specific use in formal and social communication is inevitable. The academic language use is depicted on the ground of passing the subjects, as any educational institution is mainly concerned with the promotion of the results. It is expected that learning language in the academic course will help the students to display effective communication skills besides achieving better marks in the examination. The paradox is that the students aim at just passing the subject and the teachers are demanded to produce 100% result in the end semester examinations. It is expected that the engineering students need to achieve in their semester examination and also should be able to acquire language proficiency to interact in any target situational contexts. Hence, to meet the target needs, the students are motivated to practice relevant approaches and techniques that can help them to achieve in the language test and interactional communication.

4.2. Participants

The present research is conducted to the first year Mechanical Engineering undergraduate students in a technical institution in Place. Mechanical engineering students (64) and three English faculties of the language department are involved in the study. Most of the Mechanical students (hereafter referred as, Mech. Students) had their schooling through English medium instruction. One faculty has gained 12 years of professional teaching experience and the other two has got more than 3 years. All the stakeholders commonly share that they need to cope with the university curriculum and syllabus to seek academic achievements. They are also found to be keen in practicing appropriate communication strategies for gaining proficiency.

4.3. Procedures

Qualitative ethnographic-based classroom research is conducted to scrutinise the problems of the students in the process of language learning. Observations in and out of the classroom, formal and informal discussions, unstructured interviews and class committee meetings are conducted to investigate the students' performance in both language exams and realia.

4.4. Data collection and analysis

Conducting ethnography as a research tool with emic principles is quite mandatory to explore and understand the detailed descriptions about the stakeholders' perceptions and to examine their learning problems. Further, in this research study, some of the principles of Allwright's Exploratory Practice have been followed to explore the quality of classroom life and to involve all the students in this classroom-based research (Allwright, 2003 cited in Bloom, 2007). It helped the faculties to interact with the students to discuss about their classroom experience and to analyse the treatment and proceedings of their classroom-based research. It provided sufficient critical insight on the cause and effect of the language program and suggested essential solutions for the problems faced. University-based syllabus is followed for testing and to assess academic achievement. Performance-based communicative strategies are practised for the systematic teaching and testing of the proficiency level of the students (Cummins, 1992). Students' self-awareness on utilising self-directed and cooperative learning strategies are specifically encouraged as it helped them to distinguish between gaining achievement and proficiency. They are also frequently monitored to understand their progress through repetitive oral communicative tasks. Peer interaction and their responses proved to be very instrumental in reviewing the oral and written performances of the students. This helped the faculties to address how better the students are truly competent in achieving academic results and gaining proficiency to share their knowledge and social skills.

5. Findings and discussion

The present academic syllabus and evaluation process is solely based on testing academic achievement of the students. A list of grammatical and vocabulary items constitute the basic content of the syllabus. The explicit learning of structures as discrete items has been the norms of the language syllabus for any general course. They are expected to learn these structures through pattern drills. They are prompted to explicitly learn and memorise the prescribed discrete language items through objective tests (Chudowsky & Chudowsky, 2010). Most of the teachers' focus their teaching through practicing grammar and vocabulary items. It helps them to make the students to explicitly learn, read and memorise the given linguistic content to secure better marks in the exam. As achievement tests can be better visualised through explicit learning, the students apply rote memorisation, cognitive and compensation strategies for effective learning (Oxford, 1990). The students are assessed in terms of grammar, vocabulary and spelling. They are perceived with a notion that they need to memorise the text for obtaining good scores. But still, most of the students are not gifted with good memorising skills and they are not able to put their retained ideas in writing (Kiany, 1995). They often suffer for the want of adequate vocabulary and are obstructed to construct good grammatically error free sentences, and also lack of vocabulary hinders fluency too (Tschirner, 2004). While stressing the importance of vocabulary in both speaking and writing, English Faculty.1 reflects how the students are affected in their discourse.

> 'The professional students lack adequate vocabulary skills and hence they are not found to be engaged in continuous oral and written discourse'.

As the students are given much practise for writing tests for achieving good scores in academics, they are often seen confident that they are good in writing skills. They often think that they write as they have read, sometimes they even think what they have thought and perceived, they are capable to put in writing. They feel comfortable to write answers to comprehension questions, paragraph writing and essay writing. But in reality, they commit lot of semantic, spelling and punctuation errors (Turner & Upshur, 1995). With their innate language skills, they are able to construct sentences of their own—simple, compound and even complex sentences too. But, they may not be able to put their ideas in appropriate words and their writing is found to be incomprehensive. They usually lack adequate skills of language and expression (Allen & Waugh, 1986). They are not able to write the sentences in an effective way as they lack contextual use of grammar and lexis and often commit spelling mistakes (Nel & Muller, 2010). English Faculty.3 reflected that even a good achieving student in written exams is not able to perform better in oral activities.

> 'Some students are able to write well, but while they speak, they are not able to reflect all their ideas. While discussing on any topic, they speak few sentences, but they omit most of their points'.

> 'It is also found that the one who writes good English is not solely to be found good in oral tasks due to communication apprehension'.

This proves that mere scoring good marks or seeking to better achieve in written exams little affects real communication. The students are found to be acquainted with the discrete language content but they are not able to use it appropriately in communicative contexts (Stern, 1983). Further, they are not able to communicate with confidence. They need to develop strategic, discursive and sociolinguistic competence (Leaver & Shekhtman, 2002). Again, the students need to practice discursive skills to participate in interactional communication activities (Wang & Castro, 2010). Some mediocre students are seldom found to interact with the teachers in English. Only few students who are able to speak fluently are engaged interacting with the teachers. It can be also noticed that the students are compatible to use oral form than the written form. Due to the pragmatic use of flexible grammar in oral form, the students are able to interpret their ideas through speech (Maleki & Zangani, 2007). But still, there are so many instances where one can find that even though some students who speak fluently in English are found to be very poor in writing skills. In analysing the underlying discrepancies found in the differences in skills and productive ability of the students, English Faculty.2 observes

> 'Even good speaking students often commit grammatical mistakes and their choice of vocabulary is not commendable. Hence the liberty of understanding that 'gaining oral fluency' will not determine that they have got good writing skills'.

Students are indulged in cooperative learning to practice communicative tasks for gaining better results in both achievement and proficiency tests (Hogan & Tudge, 1999). They are given practise to write their own sentences. The functional aspect of writing can be developed through writing formal and informal letters; official, administrative and technical correspondences; personal, social and business mails; essay and paragraph writing and technical report and project writing (Zhu, 2004). Writing skills may also be developed through note making, paraphrasing, writing definition, description, writing papers for presentation, case presentation and writing messages and short information. While discussing on the strategies for developing effective productive skills, a highly committed Mech. Student.34 suggested

> 'Speaking and writing skills can be developed only through using the language. We wish to practice free conversations and extended writing'.

Further Mech. Student.23 added

'Productive skills are better acquired and accomplished when we truly think and express our ideas. We need to originate our ideas in a logical sequence with utter clarity and precision'.

Most of the students analysed that they need to improve all the four skills.

'I am able to speak fluently in English, but when it comes to writing, I commit grammar mistakes. I am not able to present my thoughts in written communication'. (Mech. Student.16)

'What actually happens is we are able to organize thoughts and ideas, but specifically lack to present the ideas for the want of words to carry our thoughts'. (Mech. Student.48)

'We need to speak originally and practice small conversations. This will help me a lot' (Mech. Student.61)

'As we are used to by heart and memorize the content we don't think originally. Now, thinking in Tamil and translating in English is difficult'. (Mech. Student.33)

Selective reading and mere passing is the target of students, and hence they lack productive skills and are refrained from exploring real language and communication skills. Students are not found in engaging reflective tasks that can stimulate their language productive ability. To secure a good score in their achievement tests, students are confined to read a single text book where they are not able to gather complete information on the given subject. They lack thematic knowledge as they are not exposed to read reference books for the concerned subject. As the students rely more on tests-based preparation with selective study, English Faculty.3 revealed

'The students rest on reading textbook and staff prepared and dictated material to score for the exam. They are generally either put to memorize with or without understanding the content. They are expected to answer all the questions and to get good marks'.

Close-ended and descriptive questions need not be the same component to be focused to teach, learn and evaluate, rather more focus should be given to student autonomy for self-prepared materials. Student self-prepared materials are highly reliable as they are sufficed to produce their own sentences by generating, organising and sequencing their own ideas (Spector-Cohen, Kirschner & Wexler, 2001). When the students use their own prepared materials for both speech and writing, their level of seeking knowledge, gaining information, employing the necessary strategic skills will be highly enriched and hence they will acquire effective language and communication skills.

The real challenges of a language syllabus in academic programmes always fall on realising how better the students are really productive (Diffey, 1992). As the students need to be productive to express their knowledge, speaking and writing skills are crucial for gaining academic success (Fakeye & Ogunsiji, 2009). It can be developed through the extra-linguistic components like genre, topic, content, situation, skills and tasks. Proficiency tests aim at making the students to be competent in performing language skills for extra-linguistic purposes (Davies 1991). As self-directed learning skills helps them to achieve better results in both achievement and proficiency tests, students are found to develop cognitive skills to acquire disciplinary knowledge on various topics (Liming, 1990). In this context, some students refer the importance of topic and theme variations for knowledge dissemination.

'For academic exams, we are occupied with preparing often repeated questions relevant to the syllabus, whereas, if we need to face proficiency tests, we need to be familiar with any topic and theme'.

'We expect the teachers to provide necessary guidelines and approve our self prepared topics'.

'The presentation and discussion of informative content helps us to understand the subject and in terms, it promotes academic achievement for gaining more informative knowledge'.

Students are continuously monitored by the teachers and frequently assessed in terms of oral and written tasks. As the proficient tests are treated with the integrated approaches of skill, genre, situation, topic and task based, the students need to improve their language ability. They are given constant practise for developing language skills for acquiring fluency in communication (Binder, Haughton & Bateman, 2002). Emphasising the significance of productive skills for effective communication, English Faculty.2 suggested that it needs to be acquired by all the students.

'It should not be merely taught, learnt and evaluated as a subject; rather it should be acquired, practiced and trained as a skill. It needs to be used as a tool for promoting mutual interactions'.

Mech. Student.12 confessed on developing language and discursive skills

'We read topics for presentation and discussion, but we don't know how to present it. Major problem is grammar; we don't know how to make sentences'.

Mech. Student.48 anticipated working in teams

'As we should discuss on the topic we should have practice in it. We are familiar with grammar and general vocabulary as we study it in schools. But we should also know how to interact in group discussions'.

Proficiency tests aim at making the students to improve their discursive skills and are not constrained to deliver the students with a mere package of grammar and vocabulary items (Light, Xu & Mossop, 1987). The students are expected to use the language. They need to actually communicate and display their language and discourse skills (Gil & Bardack, 2010). Thus, the students are not exercised to memorise some language items but they are made to understand to use appropriate structures in their discourse. This is quite clear when English Faculty.3 discusses on understanding the key concepts of structures and using it for meaningful communication.

'Structural components need to be memorized and recalled for testing. This will be more advantageous if the students are capable to understand and use them in their communicative contexts. They need to apply more compensation strategies to develop their discursive skills'.

As the students think that mere passing is enough, they deliberately learn only the structures with the examination point of view and just clear the subject without any arrears in the university exams. As the content of the course is more focused on grammar and vocabulary, the students do not focus on developing skills for interactional communication (Diffey, 1992). Hence, they do not seriously prepare content and skills for both seeking achievement and gaining proficiency. This language learning incongruence limits the students neither to attain mastery on structures nor to gain fluency in communication (Turner & Upshur, 1995). The students were asked to reveal their communication difficulties and to identify strategies for successful language presentation in both achievement and proficiency tests.

The destiny of testing students' achievement is undoubtedly made by central evaluation but the testing of proficiency and mastery on the subject cannot be relied on mere evaluation. Seeking distinctions and producing outstanding achievements in the subject is determined through the wide extensive study of the whole syllabus. But, the present achievement tests and evaluation system are solely oriented towards

1. Selective intensive study.

2. Revising previous 3–5 year solved question papers.

3. Concentrating more on objective type of questions

4. Reading the supplementary books like guides and notes rather than completely following syllabus texts and reference books.

5. No attempt is made to study beyond the syllabus.

6. Depending more on teachers' dictated materials but not on the actual teaching of the subject.

7. Emphasis is given to memorise than understanding the content.

Though the objective of the syllabus intends at promoting language proficiency and communicative competency, the graded content of the syllabus, teaching, learning and evaluation processes are not truly oriented towards facilitating the whole of language learning. The students are used to learn and practice some selected content rather than practicing the language in extended discourse. This limits the student to engage even in controlled and free conversations. With the selective reading of the content, the students may be able to achieve in exams but they are not able to become a proficient user of the language. The paradox of language learning in the academic course is the students are able to achieve, but not able to communicate. The language teachers are held responsible to make the students to communicate in English. Neither the syllabus nor the testing rests on developing language and communication. By following the prescribed content and evaluation techniques, the teachers are liable to produce 100% results in achievement tests and are expected to make the students to be more communicative. The teachers are found to follow their own independent teaching strategies and practice innovative techniques in the classroom (Nel & Muller, 2010). They invariably use both direct and indirect strategies of learning to visualise their instructional paradigm, 'learn to achieve and communicate to use the language'.

6. Implications of the study

Achievement tests are oriented towards selective text preparation and it is more based on content specific and explicit learning of structures. It is more realised through cognitive learning and academic progress is generally recognised through the explicit learning of structures and content (Allen & Waugh, 1986). Krashen (1981, cited in Stern, 1983) claims proficiency in speaking skills cannot be developed through explicit language learning. Proficient tests are specifically based on generic skills and implicit learning. It promotes discursive skills and envisages inherent talent and expertise through interaction. As language learning aims at developing cognition and communication skills, students need to be constantly encouraged in practising both explicit and implicit learning.

Language testing can be done through performance-based oral and written assessments. Reliability and validity of students' performance can be assessed, tested and evaluated through peer response and feedback. When speaking skills are to be tested, open tasks needs to be conducted for analyzsing the skills of discourse (Bruton, 2005). Besides, scrutinising the structural components like grammar, lexis and phonology, non-verbal cues can also be tested for attitude and behaviour check. Pragmatic approach needs to be adopted while practicing and testing both speaking and writing skills (Freeman, Freeman & Mercuri, 2003). The students need to face achievement tests with adequate discrete knowledge on the structures and for proficiency tests; they need to be more pragmatic in participating in discourse. Mastery of specific language and functional items is must for scoring better in

achievement tests and the contextual use of structures in generic interactional discourse is must for performing better in proficiency tests.

Language teaching should focus on genre, skills and task based instruction to develop the communicative ability of the students. Cooperative learning, peer response, faculty feedback, counselling and empathetic understanding helps the students to confidently engage in discursive tasks and to improve language performance (Calderon, 1999). To facilitate proficiency and competency-based language learning, interactional methodology needs to be adopted and practised. Students should be given liberty to speak confidently and to work in pairs and groups (Dzulkifli & Alias, 2012). Students' language and communication ability can be assessed through their active participation and performances in oral and written presentations. This will make them to confidently face the achievement test too. They should have sufficient cognitive and language output to engage in open tasks to discuss, negotiate, identify and solve problems (Wang & Castro, 2010). It can be generalised that they need to practise open tasks to exercise their thinking, receptive and productive skills.

7. Conclusion

The students need to excel in both achievement and proficiency tests. To achieve in exams, they need to orient with content specific learning and to become proficient user of language, they need to practice genres, topics, situations, skills and tasks (Song, 2005). Competence and performance-based assessments can be carried out through undertaking skills-based proficiency tests (Weir, 1988). The present language syllabus and evaluation procedures are devoid of performance-based approaches to learning. Even the genre, topic, situation, skill and task-based interactional communicative activities are not actively engaged as they are least undertaken in the process of evaluation. In the present curriculum, open tasks are not much focused, as they are not included in both formative and summative assessments. The process of testing and evaluation is solely based on reading and writing, and hence the tasks that instigates listening and speaking is seldom taken to consideration (Callahan, 2006). It is widely recognised that the measures taken to achieve the close tasks necessarily do not lead to proficiency. When the students are able to perform with adequate cognitive, discourse, strategic, linguistic and socioethnic competence, they can be prepared to encounter any kind of assessment, though it is an achievement or proficient testing may be.

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