

An Empirical Study of “v-ing+n” Structure in Chinese Learners’ Writing: A Corpus-Based Study

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How to cite this paper: Zhu, L. (2024). An Empirical Study of “v-ing+n” Structure in Chinese Learners’ Writing: A Corpus-Based Study. *Open Journal of Social Sciences*, 12, 405-416.

<https://doi.org/10.4236/jss.2024.128025>

Received: July 22, 2024

Accepted: August 20, 2024

Published: August 23, 2024

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Abstract

Although the “v-ing+n” structure in English is widely used, which has attracted the attention of foreign language scholars to do related researches, college students in China still feel it difficult in using “v-ing+n” structure in their speech and writing because there isn’t the equivalent syntactic structure in Chinese. In order to better understand “v-ing+n” structure and use it in a right way, so as to improve college English learners’ application ability of English syntax, the author conducts an experiment lasting for 6 weeks on students’ use of “v-ing+n” structure in writing their composition. Based on qualitative and quantitative method and by comparing the frequency and accuracy of the use of “v-ing+n” in four corpora of two classes constructed by the participants’ composition in pretest and posttest, this study finds that the frequency can be increased and the accuracy can be improved through effective input of the functions of “v-ing+n” form and by doing relevant exercises. The steps of the experiment and the analysis of the result will be illustrated in this paper.

Keywords

“v-ing+n” Structure, Corpus-Based, Chinese Learners’ Writing

1. Introduction

Owing to the difference of syntactic structures and functions between English and Chinese, Chinese learners feel that “v-ing+n” structure is difficult to acquire and to use. As two types of non-finite verbs, a gerund and a present participle both end in -ing, and both come from a verb. However, each has a different function, which makes it more confusing for Chinese learners. In order to find effective

methods to help Chinese learners to better understand “v-ing+n” structure and put it into right use, the author conduct an experiment on college English learners’ use of “v-ing+n” structure in their writing, so as to check the effect of inputting syntactic principles of “v-ing+n” by analyzing the result of the experiment.

2. Background

2.1. Literature Review

As a hot topic over decades, v-ing forms have attracted linguists’ attention, and they study different aspects of v-ing forms. Several academics disagree on the categorization based on syntactical analysis of their grammatical functions. As everyone knows, present participle and gerund are the two sources of v-ing forms in contemporary English. Otto Jespersen (1924) separated v-ing forms into participles and gerunds based on their heterogeneity. Later, several academics came to the same conclusion. Taylor (1996), for example, classified present participles and gerunds according to various v-ing form characteristics. The classification approach was also used by Bo Bing (2004), Zhang Daozhen (2011), Lee (2007), and Pullum & Zwicky (1991).

However, some academics disagreed with the difference and were in favor of combining the two. Quirk et al., (1985), for instance, separated v-ing forms into three subclasses: verbal noun, deverbial noun, and participle. However, his main goal was to highlight how the features of noun and verb for v-ing forms are consistent. It is challenging to separate gerunds and participles exactly for V-ing forms since the line between them is hazy and imprecise. According to Cambridge Grammar of English (Carter & McCarthy, 2006), morphology, syntax, and semantics could not be used to separate v-ing forms. According to Shen Jiaxuan (2015), there was no perceptual distinction between the forms of v-ing when they were used as participles and gerunds. It was incorrect to divide v-ing forms into gerunds and participles since we should uphold the tenet of “same form, same grammatical category,” which further muddled English grammar.

What are the syntactic functions of v-ing in English sentences? In this regard, He Lirong analyzes the syntactic functions of the present participle and the verb in English sentences, namely the present participle can be used as subject, predicative, object of preposition, object complement in a sentence, while the verb can be used as subject, object, attribute, predicative and appositive. And Feng Yujuan even makes it clear that v-ing can be used as an attributive, a predicative, and a logical subject in English sentences. This shows that v-ing can be followed by a noun phrase, i.e. “v-ing+n” structure. A search of CNKI (China National Knowledge Infrastructure) shows that academics have paid attention to English v-ing and conducted related researches: Zhang Keding analyzed the causes of ambiguity in v-ing and its elimination methods; Xie Yiping briefly analyzed the forms of v-ing; Zhang Qingfeng analyzed the non-predicative forms of English verbs “v+ing style” and “to+v style”. Zhang Qingfeng made a comparative analysis on the semantics of the English verb non-predicative form “v+ing style” and “to+v

style”; Zhang Dianen analyzed the grammatical function of the English “v-ing+object” structure; Zhou Fen made a comparative analysis on the English v+to+Infinitive and v+to+v-ing structures. The main verb in the v+to+v-ing structure of the COCA corpus is also explored; Tong Ying analyzes whether the noun or v-ing is used as the definite article in advertising English; Zhang Biyun analyzes the English-Chinese translation of the v+ing form; Bo Jinhua analyzes the lexicalization of the v-ing form in contemporary English from the perspective of complex adaptive systems. From these academic studies on “v-ing”, we can see that scholars in foreign languages have not paid much attention to the syntactic function of the “v-ing+n” structure and it lacks empirical studies of second language learners’ application of “v-ing+n” structure in their speech and writing. In order to strengthen the students’ understanding of “v-ing+n” structure and help them find right ways to use this structure in their writing, this study make an attempt to find effective measures to propel students’ cognitive process of English syntactic application. In order to prove these measures can positively effect the students’ understanding and application process, the author make an experiment to show the effect of these measures by analyzing the result of the study.

2.2. Research Questions

Not so many previous studies focus on L2 learners’ practical use of “v-ing+n” structure and their error types. Based on self-built learner corpus, aiming to seek effective approaches to help students better understand “v-ing+n” structure and improve their performance in their writing, this study is categorized into an empirical study to testify the effect of these teaching approaches, to dig out the collocation network and analyze the common error types by comparing the result of pretest and posttest to evaluate the students’ frequency and accuracy of using “v-ing+n” structure in their writing. The study sets out to answer the following questions:

- 1) Do students show great improvement in the frequency and accuracy of using “v-ing+n” structure in their writing after instructors’ explicit instruction of “v-ing+n” structure?
- 2) What is the collocation network of “v-ing+n” structure in students’ writing?
- 3) What are the common error types in the “v-ing+n” structure in students’ writing?

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

Sixty students of Zhejiang Yuexiu University took the pretest and posttest with an interval of six weeks. All the participants are the researcher’s students who are non-English majors in the first semester of sophomore year, and they are in two classes with the same teacher and they are sitting in the same classroom but at different time. According to the analysis of students’ scores in college English test of band four and band six, students’ English proficiency in these two classes are

in the similar level. Four students in class 2002 have passed band six, three in class 2001. 8 students in each class have not passed band 4, and the rest have not passed band 6 but band 4. Students are aware of the study purpose and study procedure at the beginning of the experiment.

Before the pretest, they have the similar English learning experiences, most of them focus on learning English grammar and doing a lot of exercises in high school because they believe that only by doing so can they achieve high scores in college entrance exam. While when they entered into college, the greatest motivation to learn English is to pass national college English test which can help them find a good job after graduation. Listening and reading comprehension ability is two dominant factors to pass the test. Therefore, they shift their focus from grammar learning to listening and reading practice, they have only one English teacher and two courses in the first two years in college, one is listening and the other is integrated course. Only 6 hours each week are mandatory for them to attend the class of these two English courses. It is difficult for a teacher to sort out proper times in class for students to practice their English writing. They just assign students to write a passage no more than three times in one semester.

Eligible participants were invited to take the pretest and the posttest at the beginning and end of our project, respectively. Students are asked to write one passage entitled “Develop Our Ability to Meet Challenge” in the pretest and another passage entitled “How to Balance Work and Leisure” in the posttest. For each passage, they should write at least 150 words but no more than 200 words. They are required to type their passage into the online platform of our course within 35 minutes in class. After each round of data collection, participants received 5-mark-reward that contributes to their holistic assessment of this semester for their participation.

3.2. Explicit Teaching and Learning Activities

After the pretest, teaching and learning activities are concerned with the teacher’s input of syntactic function analysis of “v-ing+n” structure in class, and students’ online and offline exercises after class. It will be illustrated in detail as follows:

3.2.1. The Analysis of Syntactic Function of “v-ing+n” Structure

The function of “v-ing structure” are: 1) The “v-ing+n” structure is used as the subject. For example: *Visiting relatives can be tiresome. /Flying planes can be dangerous. /Speaking English well is not easy.* 2) The “v-ing+n” construction is used as the predicative. For example: *Our task is cleaning the classroom after school. /His job is teaching English.* 3) The “v-ing+n” construction is used as the object of a preposition. For example: *We live in the changing world. /He stayed in a sleeping car last night.* 4) The “v-ing+n” construction is used as an adverbial. For example: *Opening the door, I saw nothing in the house. /She sat on ground, reading a newspaper.* 5) The “v-ing+n” construction is used as an object complement. For example: *I saw the boys playing basketball. /I don’t remember him ever saying anything like that. /I saw her crossing the street.*

From the interaction with students, I am informed that they are much less aware of the function of “v-ing+n” structure functioning as an object compliment. In order to raise the awareness of the use of “v-ing+n” structure functioning as an object compliment, we have explained more about the above examples: 1) *I saw the boys playing basketball.* 2) *I don't remember him ever saying anything like that.* 3) *I saw her crossing the street.*

Functioning as object complement means that the object of the sentence is the agent who does the action of v-ing. In other words, the object is the logical subject of v-ing. If we look more closely, we can see that the *boy* in the second example above is the logical subject of playing basketball; *him* in the third example is the agent who does the action of saying anything and *him* is the logical subject of saying anything; *her* in the last example is the agent who does the action of crossing the street and *her* is the logical subject of crossing the street

3.2.2. Students' Online and Offline Exercises of “v-ing+n” Structure

Because the limited time in class, students are required to do several exercises each week online or offline after class and they may take many forms as follows: 1) blank-filling: fill the blanks in a sentence with the right form of a given verb. Actually, the majority of the words in these blanks are supposed to be v-ing form, but students are required to fill without being given any relevant directions. 2) sentence making: make at least two sentences with “v-ing+n” structure for each categories of the syntactic functions mentioned in class as shown in the previous session. 3) syntactic function recognizing: recognize the syntactic function of the sentences which contain the “v-ing+n” structure in the article in our course textbook.

4. Result and Discussion

4.1. Data Cleaning and Data Classification

After collecting the students' writings from pretest and posttest, with the help of calculation tool, LancsBOX (Brezina et al. 2015), the researcher successfully construct two corpora for each class, one is the corpus of pretest, and the other is corpus of posttest. With the help of Lancsbox, the researcher easily sort out the sentences which contain the “v-ing+n” structure in every corpus. After that, the researcher carefully check the accuracy of all the sentences and put them into five categories according to the syntactic function of “v-ing+n” structure in each sentence, that is subject, predicative, prepositional object, adverbial and object compliment. And then manually calculate the frequency of “v-ing+n” structure in each category.

4.2. Statistical Analysis

After the data cleaning and data classification, with the help of Lancsbox and with manual hard work, the statistics have been calculated as shown in the following two tables.

Table 1. The number and accuracy of “v-ing+n” structure in four corpora.

Syntactic variables	Class 2001		Class 2002	
	Pretest (247)	Posttest (248)	Pretest (226)	Posttest (222)
The frequency of using “v-ing+n” structure	107 /43%	117 /47%	93 /41%	105 /47%
The accuracy of using “v-ing+n” structure	88 /82%	98 /84%	79 /85%	87 /83%

Table 2. The number of “v-ing+n” structure in five categories in four corpora.

Syntactic variables	Class 2001		Class 2002	
	Pretest (88)	Posttest (98)	Pretest (79)	Posttest (87)
Subject	30	27	22	25
Predicative	17	18	12	13
Prepositional phrases	30	33	29	28
Adverbial	9	19	15	20
Object compliment	2	1	1	1

From **Table 1**, it can interpret that the frequency of using “v-ing+n” structure in these two classes has improved, because of the frequent input of the syntactic analysis of “v-ing+n” structure by doing a lot of exercises, although the accuracy has not been prominently enhanced.

Table 2 shows the variety of sentence pattern of “v-ing+n” structure. Comparing the number of subject, predicative, prepositional object, adverbial and object compliment, “v-ing+n” structure used as a prepositional phrase and a subject account for the first two places, it can be inferred that students are best at using “v-ing+n” structure as a prepositional phrase and subject. For example, *Instead of living a mediocre life, it is meaningful to...* (a prepositional phrase)/*Moreover, facing challenges is crucial for students’ mental growth* (a subject). “v-ing+n” structure used as an adverbial and an object compliment have been left behind, because “v-ing+n” structure functioning as an adverbial or an object compliment brings complexity for students to comprehend, let alone apply them in their writing. For example, *When facing challenges, it is common for us to feel...* (an adverbial).

In fact, after analyzing the syntactic function of “v-ing+n” structure after pretest, it can be found the inadequate use of “v-ing+n” used as an adverbial and an object compliment, so that students are assigned to do additional exercises to make more sentences with “v-ing+n” structure functioning as adverbial and an

object compliment. By comparing the number of “v-ing+n” structure used as an adverbial between pretest and post-test in these two classes, we can find that the frequency has been raised to some extent, and the frequency of using “v-ing+n” structure as an adverbial has been increased the most comparing the other categories. But there is no noticeable change of the use of object compliment, probably resulting from the fixed expression of “v-ing+n” structure followed a particular group of sensory verbs. It seems that this particular group of verbs may not easily occur to students mind when they are required to finish writing a passage in a limited time.

From above analysis, we can conclude that students show certain improvement in the frequency of using “v-ing+n” structure in their writing, even though it is not statistically obvious in the improvement of accuracy. Because there is an increase in the use of “v-ing+n” structure functioning as an adverbial that students are not familiar with, in that sense, the accuracy has been improved to some extent. Therefore, we can claim that there is a positive impact of teaching activities on students’ application of the “v-ing+n” structure.

In order to improve the students’ understanding and application English syntax, it is worth considering whether “v-ing+n” structure is a typical structure or not. In the process of conducting the experiment, so many realistic situations and factor are necessary to take into account, such as whether there are distinctive differences between gerund and present participle, what kind of exercises are suitable for students to do with the purpose of enhancing their analytical and practicable capabilities.

4.3. Collocation Network Analysis

Considering two general factors to contribute to the quality of second language writing, sentence structure and the wording, this study not only analyses the syntactic structure of “v-ing+n” structure, but also simultaneously explore a little about the collocation before and after v-ing form because the proper collocations not only have an impact on the right use of v-ing form in a sentence, but also contribute to the diversity of the sentence structure. With the help of Lanscbox, the collocation network maps of v-ing form in the four corpora have been gained and shown as **Figures 1-4**.

As shown in above figures, although there is no obvious change of students’ choice of words, we can figure that the majority of the words student tend to use some functional words to follow v-ing form, and the nominal words after v-ing form are simple and restricted to the related topic.

4.4. Error Analysis of “v-ing+n”

To investigate the types of errors that L2 learners can make when using “v-ing+n” form, let us see some examples in my students’ writings. Now let us focus on the highly frequent error types that the participants have made like omission, verb form and agreement, etc.

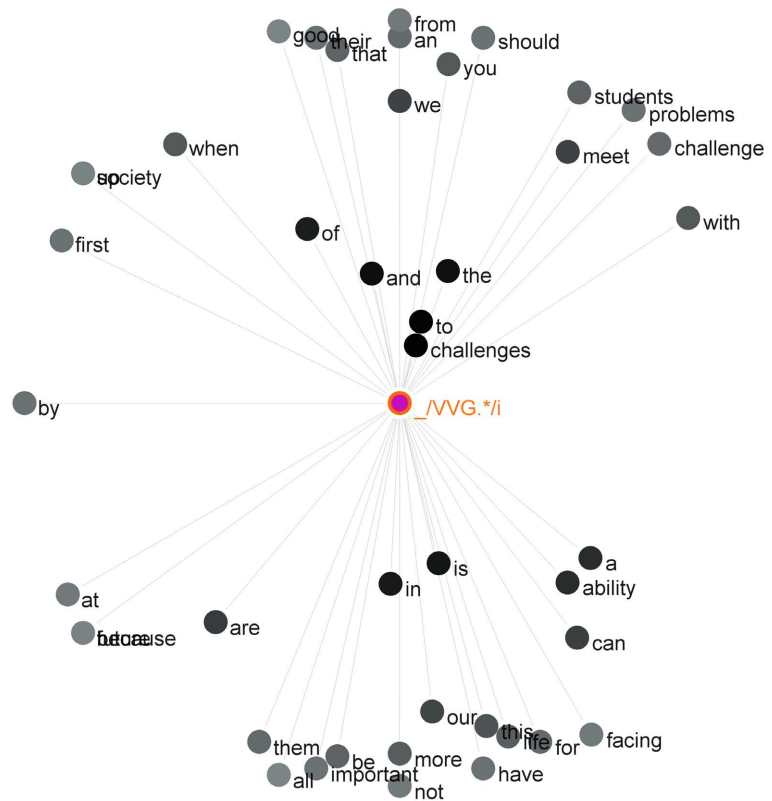


Figure 1. Collocation of v-ing in pretest of class2001.

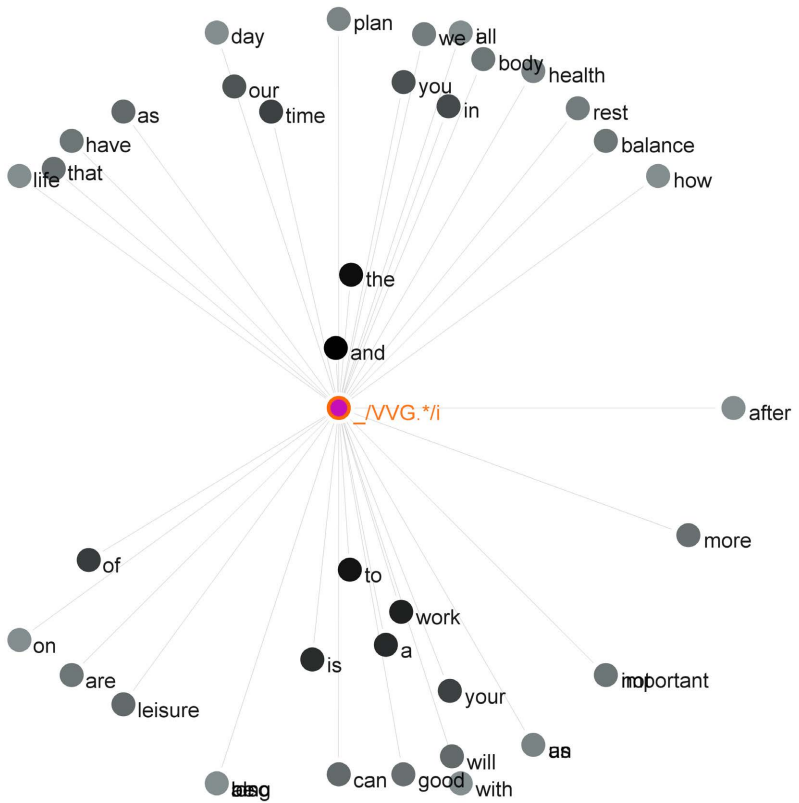


Figure 2. Collocation of v-ing in posttest of class2001.

4.4.1. Omission

Eg. 1) *to grow up with challenges. Only **meeting and achieving** challenges, everyone can become better and grow up.*

2) *a famous sentence describe those people who **working** all day so that losing their passion.*

3) *face with challenges lonely, our fear and helpless **occupying** the heart. So we try a challenge.*

The “v-ing+n” form in above three examples are in incorrect use because the word “when” in the first example and “are” in the second and third examples are omitted so that the three sentences are grammatically incorrect.

4.4.2. Verb Form

1) *how to look at them, treat them, **testing** everyone’s wisdom, we should learn to use.*

2) *developing. Actually, these challenge come from every zone and **showing** in people’s daily life. The difficult problem.*

The “v-ing+n” form in above two examples are in incorrect use because “testing” in first example should be replaced by “to test” which is used after “how to”, “showing” should be replaced by “show” which is the simple present tense.

4.4.3. Agreement

1) *give up ourselves, we will **losing** without fighting. Second, we should be well prepared. We all know.*

2) *a part in these challenges. You **will** even **losing** jobs if you have no enough abilities.*

3) *a part in these challenges. You will even **losing** jobs if you have no enough abilities.*

4) *and your family. What’s more, you can maybe **losing** your life if you unable to stand.*

5) *we will **losing** without fighting. Second, we should be well prepared. We all know.*

6) *a whole day’s work is essential to **facing** the new challenges in work full of time to relax is the key to **balancing** work and leisure. If the time is not.*

7) *wrestling, wanting to give up, and finally adhering to **mastering** skateboarding skills. These are all.*

8) *in our life. Some challenges can help us **becoming** better and better, while some challenges can.*

As we can see, the errors in the above examples are the same type. Modal verbs generally take the bare infinitive, so the “v-ing+n” form in examples 1) to 5) should change into the bare infinitive, that is, *losing* should change into *lose*. Meanwhile, “*facing* and *balancing*” should change into “*face* and *balance*” because the verb after the construction of “be+adj.+to” in these two sentences should be infinitive. While in the examples of 7) to 8), the construction of “adhere to do sth.” and “help sb to do/do sth.” are widely used, so “*mastering* and *becoming*” in these

two examples should change into “master and become”

5. Conclusion

5.1. Pedagogical Implications

5.1.1. Strengthen the Teaching of English Syntactic Knowledge

The practice of university English teaching proves that some students do not have enough knowledge of English syntax, which leads them to be overwhelmed when they use English, especially when they analyze the sentence structure, and they do not know how to respond to the ambiguity of English syntax changes. Therefore, in the teaching of English in college, teachers need to strengthen the teaching of English syntax in a targeted way and guide students to learn to use English syntax.

Therefore, in college English teaching, teachers need to strengthen the teaching of English syntactic knowledge, and guide students to learn to use English syntactic knowledge, so as to “teach people to fish” and really cultivate students’ English language analysis and understanding ability.

5.1.2. Improving the Effect of English Vocabulary Teaching

Vocabulary teaching, as an important part of college English teaching, has an irreplaceable role in students’ English learning. Therefore, it is necessary to focus on teaching English vocabulary. To implement the teaching of English vocabulary in college, we think we should start from the following aspects. First, teachers must invest a lot of time to study the vocabulary involved in the textbook, adopt a realistic teaching method according to the task of vocabulary teaching, reasonably set questions closely related to vocabulary, and set the vocabulary students should master into the discussion in order to achieve the expected vocabulary teaching effect. Second, guide students to analyze and understand the ambiguity of English vocabulary, choose words reasonably, and improve their ability to use English vocabulary correctly. Third, we make full use of modern network technology to improve the effectiveness of English vocabulary teaching, such as circling key vocabulary based on corpus, using real language as the main language input, emphasizing the learning process of exploration and discovery, advocating the use of inductive learning methods, and guiding students to use mobile terminals outside of class, to effectively master the use of English vocabulary.

5.1.3. Improving Students’ English Application Ability

As mentioned above, the teaching of English vocabulary and English syntactic knowledge are crucial for college students to learn English. Understanding and analyzing the phenomenon of English vocabulary ambiguity and mastering certain knowledge of English syntax are indispensable for improving students’ ability to apply English. From the above analysis of the syntactic function of “v-ing+n” structure and its ambiguity, we can see that in order to improve students’ English application ability, it is necessary to consolidate their knowledge of English vocabulary and syntax, and to read, write, listen and speak more. Only by combining reading and writing, and integrating listening and speaking, can students improve

their correctness in using English.

5.2. Limitation and Future Direction

This study conducts a short-term experiment to check whether students' frequency and accuracy can be improved by effective input of syntactic function of "v-ing+n" structure and adopting appropriate teaching methodologies. Because the limited time, the result is not as positive as I have expected. Therefore, in order to see the prominently positive impact of input of English syntax on students' understanding and application, it is advisable to conduct an experiment at least one semester to compare the students' academic performance.

In summary, this study has made an attempt to seek right ways to help students better understand and correctly apply "v-ing+n" structure in their writing, so as to improve college English learners' application ability of English syntax. Based on qualitative and quantitative method and by comparing the frequency and accuracy of "v-ing+n" in four corpora of two classes constructed by the participants' composition in pretest and posttest, this study finds that the frequency can be increased and the accuracy can be improved through effective input of the functions of "v-ing+n" structure and by doing relevant exercises. By doing this study, the author has gained some meaningful and practicable implications which are beneficial to teach English for L2 learners.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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