



The Role-Playing to Improve Expressive Language Skills Children Aged 4-5 at Tunas Indah Kindergarten

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ABSTRACT

Expressive language ability is a crucial aspect of early childhood development that enables children to articulate thoughts, feelings, and needs to their social environment. This study aims to describe the implementation of role-playing method and its effectiveness in improving expressive language skills of children aged 4–5 years at TK Tunas Indah, Jambi City. The study employed a Classroom Action Research (CAR) design following the Kemmis and McTaggart model, conducted in two cycles each comprising planning, action, observation, and reflection phases. The subjects were 15 children from Group A at TK Tunas Indah Jambi for the 2024/2025 academic year. Data were collected through observation, documentation, and field notes, and analyzed using data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Results revealed a significant improvement in children's expressive language ability across cycles. In the pre-cycle, 40% of children were categorized as Not Yet Developing (BB), 33% as Beginning to Develop (MB), 20% as Developing as Expected (BSH), and 7% as Developing Very Well (BSB). Following Cycle II, BB dropped to 0%, MB to 13%, BSH rose to 40%, and BSB reached 47%. These findings confirm that the role-playing method effectively stimulates children's active language use, expands vocabulary, builds speaking confidence, and strengthens social interaction. This research provides practical contributions for early childhood educators in designing innovative and engaging language learning activities.

INTRODUCTION

Early childhood refers to individuals aged 0–8 years, a developmental period often described as the “golden age” of human growth and development (Suyadi & Ulfah, 2022). During this stage, all aspects of development, including cognitive, language, socio-emotional, physical-motor, and moral-religious domains, progress rapidly and are highly responsive to environmental stimulation. Law No. 20 of 2003 concerning the National Education System stipulates that early childhood education is provided prior to primary education through formal, non-formal, and informal pathways, with the aim of supporting children's physical and psychological development and preparing them for further education.

One of the most important developmental domains in early childhood education is language development. Language serves as the primary tool through which children communicate, express ideas, understand instructions, and establish social relationships with peers and adults (Papalia & Martorell, 2021). Language development consists of two major components: receptive language and expressive language. Receptive language refers to a child's ability to understand and interpret messages received from others, whereas expressive language refers to the ability to communicate thoughts, feelings, needs, and experiences through words, sentences, and gestures that can be understood by others (Owens, 2020).

Expressive language skills among children aged 4–5 years include the ability to use simple sentences consisting of five to six words, ask and answer questions verbally, retell simple experiences, express feelings and needs through language, and interact with peers using a variety of vocabulary (Ministry of Education and Culture Regulation No. 137 of 2014; Santrock, 2021). Well-developed expressive language skills at this age provide a critical foundation for literacy development, social competence, and future academic success (Rowe & Snow, 2020).

Appropriate and high-quality language stimulation plays a significant role in supporting the development of children's expressive language abilities. Hart and Risley's research (as cited in Rowe & Snow, 2020) revealed that children who receive rich language stimulation at home and in school tend to possess broader vocabularies and stronger communication skills than those who receive limited stimulation. Within formal educational settings, early childhood teachers play a strategic role in creating learning environments that support language development through the selection of appropriate, varied, and developmentally suitable teaching methods (Wortham & Hardin, 2021).

However, preliminary observations conducted at Tunas Indah Kindergarten in Jambi City in September 2024 indicated that the expressive language skills of children aged 4–5 years remained relatively low. Among the fifteen children who participated in the study, many experienced difficulties expressing opinions verbally, answering teachers' questions using complete sentences, communicating actively with peers, and utilizing a diverse range of vocabulary in daily conversations. Initial assessment data showed that 40% of the children were categorized as “Not Yet Developed”





(BB), while 33% were categorized as “Beginning to Develop” (MB). These findings suggest the need for innovative instructional interventions to improve children’s expressive language abilities.

One instructional method considered relevant and effective for enhancing expressive language development in young children is the role-playing method. Role playing is a play-based learning strategy that allows children to act out specific characters, situations, or events within an enjoyable and imaginative environment (Muliawan, 2022). Through role-playing activities, children are encouraged to speak, interact, negotiate, and express ideas verbally according to the roles they perform, thereby directly stimulating the development of expressive language skills.

The implementation of role playing in early childhood education is consistent with Jean Piaget’s theory of cognitive development, which states that children aged 4–5 years are in the preoperational stage, during which symbolic and representational thinking begins to develop (Piaget, as cited in Santrock, 2021). As a form of symbolic play, role playing provides an appropriate medium for children to represent real-world experiences through imagination and play. Furthermore, this method aligns with Lev Vygotsky’s social constructivist theory, which emphasizes the importance of social interaction and scaffolding in children’s learning processes (Vygotsky, as cited in Bodrova & Leong, 2020). During role-playing activities, children operate within their Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), where interactions with peers and teachers provide scaffolding that facilitates language growth.

Previous studies have supported the effectiveness of role-playing methods in enhancing expressive language skills among young children. Pratiwi and Setiawati (2021) found that role-playing activities significantly improved speaking abilities among children aged 5–6 years at Dharma Wanita Kindergarten in Surabaya. Hidayah, Rohman, and Fauzi (2022) reported a 62% increase in children’s active vocabulary following the implementation of role-playing activities at Ananda Early Childhood Education Center in Malang. Kurniasih and Wahyuni (2023) revealed that locally themed role-playing activities successfully enhanced children’s confidence and storytelling abilities. At the international level, studies conducted by Lin and Lin (2020) in Taiwan and Kim (2021) in South Korea consistently demonstrated a positive relationship between pretend play and the development of expressive language skills among preschool children.

Despite these findings, a research gap remains. Most previous studies have been conducted in Java and have rarely explored early childhood education contexts in Jambi City, which possesses distinct cultural and socio-economic characteristics. In addition, previous research has predominantly focused on children aged 5–6 years, while studies involving children aged 4–5 years remain limited. The novelty of the present study lies in three aspects: (1) the implementation of role-playing activities based on local Malay cultural themes of Jambi among children aged 4–5 years; (2) a comprehensive analysis of multiple dimensions of expressive language, including vocabulary, speech fluency, self-confidence, and social interaction; and (3) its empirical contribution to the field of early childhood education in Jambi City. Based on this background, the research question is formulated as follows: “Can the implementation of the role-playing method improve the expressive language skills of children aged 4–5 years at Tunas Indah Kindergarten, Jambi City?” Accordingly, the objective of this study is to describe the implementation process of the role-playing method and analyze its effectiveness in improving the expressive language skills of children aged 4–5 years at Tunas Indah Kindergarten, Jambi City.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Expressive language is a fundamental aspect of language development that enables children to communicate their thoughts, feelings, needs, and experiences effectively. According to Owens (2020), expressive language involves the ability to use words, phrases, and sentences to convey meaning to others. For children aged 4–5 years, expressive language development includes the ability to speak in complete sentences, ask and answer questions, engage in conversations, use varied vocabulary, and retell simple stories or experiences (Santrock, 2021). Strong expressive language skills contribute significantly to children’s social competence, literacy development, and future academic achievement (Rowe & Snow, 2020). Therefore, early childhood education programs should provide rich language experiences and interactive learning opportunities that encourage children to communicate actively.

One instructional approach that has been widely recognized for promoting expressive language development is the role-playing method. Role playing is a play-based learning strategy in which children assume specific roles and act out real-life or imaginary situations within a meaningful social context (Muliawan, 2022). This method is grounded in Piaget’s theory of symbolic play and Vygotsky’s social constructivist perspective, both of which emphasize the importance of active engagement, imagination, and social interaction in children’s learning. Through role-playing activities, children are encouraged to speak, negotiate, share ideas, and interact with peers, thereby providing abundant opportunities to practice expressive language skills. Previous studies have consistently demonstrated that role playing enhances children’s vocabulary, speaking fluency, confidence, storytelling abilities, and social communication skills (Pratiwi & Setiawati, 2021; Hidayah et al., 2022; Lin & Lin, 2020). Consequently, the role-playing method is considered an effective and developmentally appropriate strategy for improving expressive language skills among children aged 4–5 years.





METHOD

This study employed a Classroom Action Research (CAR) approach that was collaborative and participatory in nature. Classroom Action Research was selected because it enables researchers to be directly involved in improving classroom learning processes with the aim of enhancing both the quality of instruction and student learning outcomes (Arikunto, Suhardjono, & Supardi, 2021). The study adopted the Kemmis and McTaggart on Nataliya V. Ivonka (2023) action research model, which consists of four stages in each cycle: (1) planning, (2) action, (3) observation, and (4) reflection. The research was conducted in three phases: the pre-cycle, Cycle I, and Cycle II.

The study used a Classroom Action Research (CAR) design based on the Kemmis and McTaggart model, which includes planning, action, observation, and reflection in each cycle. The research began with a pre-cycle stage at Tunas Indah Kindergarten, Jambi City, where initial observations and a preliminary assessment of 15 children in Group A (aged 4–5 years) were conducted. The results showed low expressive language skills, which became the basis for improvement through action research cycles. In Cycle I, the researcher and teacher collaboratively prepared lesson plans, learning media, and observation instruments, then implemented activities such as storytelling, role play, and guided conversation to stimulate children's expressive language. Children's responses were observed and documented using observation sheets, field notes, photos, and videos. The results were reflected upon to evaluate progress and determine whether the success criterion of at least 75% of children reaching BSH or BSB had been achieved, leading to improvements for Cycle II. In Cycle II, the learning design was revised based on the reflection from Cycle I and reimplemented with more effective strategies to enhance children's participation and expression. Observations were again conducted using the same instruments, and the results were analyzed and compared with Cycle I. Finally, all data from the pre-cycle, Cycle I, and Cycle II were analyzed using Miles, Huberman, and Saldana's model to determine the effectiveness of the intervention in improving children's expressive language skills.

The study was carried out at Tunas Indah Kindergarten, Jambi City, located in Simpang Rimbo Village, Alam Barajo District, during the first semester of the 2024/2025 academic year, from September to November 2024. The participants consisted of all 15 children in Group A, aged 4–5 years, including 8 boys and 7 girls. Participants were selected purposively based on the results of the preliminary assessment, which indicated low levels of expressive language skills among the children. Data were collected through three techniques: (1) systematic observation using observation sheets developed according to the expressive language indicators for children aged 4–5 years as outlined in Ministry of Education and Culture Regulation No. 137 of 2014; (2) documentation in the form of photographs of learning activities, video recordings of role-playing sessions, and children's work products; and (3) field notes used to record significant events during the learning process that were not captured through the observation instruments.

The primary research instrument was an observation checklist designed to assess children's expressive language skills based on five indicators: (1) the ability to express opinions or ideas verbally; (2) the ability to answer teachers' questions using complete sentences; (3) the ability to communicate and interact with peers; (4) mastery and use of varied vocabulary; and (5) the ability to retell simple stories or events. Each indicator was assessed using a four-level developmental scale: Not Yet Developed (BB, score 1), Beginning to Develop (MB, score 2), Developing as Expected (BSH, score 3), and Developing Very Well (BSB, score 4). The instrument was validated by two early childhood education experts and one Indonesian language expert.

Data analysis followed the interactive analysis model proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2020), which consists of three components: (1) data reduction, involving the selection and simplification of data relevant to the research focus; (2) data display in the form of tables, graphs, and descriptive narratives; and (3) conclusion drawing and verification based on the analyzed data. The criterion for research success was established as a minimum of 75% of children achieving the categories of Developing as Expected (BSH) or Developing Very Well (BSB).

RESULT

Initial Condition of Children's Expressive Language Skills (Pre-Cycle)

Before the classroom action research was implemented, a pre-cycle observation was conducted to assess the expressive language skills of all research participants. The observations were carried out over three days, from September 9–11, 2024, during regular classroom learning activities. The results indicated that most children were still categorized as Not Yet Developed and Beginning to Develop. The detailed results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Pre-Cycle Observation Results of Children's Expressive Language Skills

No.	Category	Ccode	Number of Children	Percentage (%)
1	Not Yet Developed	BB	6	40
2	Beginning to Develop	MB	5	33
3	Developing as Expected	BSH	3	20
4	Developing Very Well	BSB	1	7
Total			15	100

Source: Pre-cycle observation data, September 2024.





Table 1 shows that during the pre-cycle stage, 40% of the children (6 out of 15) were categorized as **Not Yet Developed (BB)**, while 33% (5 children) were categorized as **Beginning to Develop (MB)**. Thus, 73% of the children had not yet reached the expected level of expressive language development. Only 20% (3 children) were categorized as **Developing as Expected (BSH)** and 7% (1 child) as **Developing Very Well (BSB)**. These results were far below the predetermined success criterion, which required at least 75% of children to achieve the BSH or BSB category. Field observations revealed that children in the BB category generally responded to teachers' questions only through head nods or single-word answers, were reluctant to speak in front of peers, and possessed a very limited active vocabulary.

Implementation and Results of Cycle I

Cycle I was conducted over two weeks, from September 16–27, 2024, consisting of four learning sessions. During the planning stage, the researcher and classroom teacher collaboratively prepared daily lesson plans based on the role-playing method, designed role-playing materials with the theme “Traditional Market,” developed observation sheets, and created role-play scenarios appropriate to the children’s age and the cultural context of Malay Jambi. The Traditional Market theme was selected because it was familiar to the children and provided rich opportunities for learning vocabulary related to buying and selling transactions.

During implementation, the teacher introduced the role-play scenarios, assigned roles such as vegetable seller, fish seller, customer, and cashier, and provided examples of dialogues. The children were then encouraged to create and express their own dialogues creatively. The teacher acted as a facilitator by providing scaffolding through guiding questions and positive verbal feedback.

Table 2. Observation Results of Children’s Expressive Language Skills in Cycle I

No.	Category	Code	Number of Children	Percentage (%)
1	Not Yet Developed	BB	3	20
2	Beginning to Develop	MB	5	33
3	Developing as Expected	BSH	5	33
4	Developing Very Well	BSB	2	14
Total			15	100

Source: Cycle I observation data, September–October 2024.

As shown in Table 2, there was a notable improvement compared to the pre-cycle condition. The percentage of children categorized as BB decreased from 40% to 20%, while those in the BSH category increased from 20% to 33%, and those in the BSB category increased from 7% to 14%. Overall, the percentage of children achieving the BSH and BSB categories reached 47%, which was still below the success criterion of 75%. Observations indicated that children became more enthusiastic about speaking during role-playing activities; however, some children remained hesitant and tended to use very short sentences.

Reflection on Cycle I and Improvements for Cycle II

Based on observation results and field notes from Cycle I, the researcher and classroom teacher conducted a reflection session and identified several areas requiring improvement. These included: (1) role-play scenarios that were too general and insufficiently motivating for children to initiate conversation; (2) excessive teacher scaffolding, which reduced opportunities for independent speech; (3) limited opportunities for shy children to express themselves; and (4) insufficient time allocated for role-playing activities.

To address these issues, several improvements were planned for Cycle II: (1) introducing new themes, namely “**Village Health Center**” and “**Jambi Malay Traditional Ceremony**,” to enrich vocabulary and increase motivation; (2) reducing teacher dominance in dialogue modeling and implementing peer scaffolding; (3) rotating major roles among all children, including shy participants; (4) extending the duration of role-playing sessions; and (5) adding post-role-play group discussions to encourage reflection and communication.

Implementation and Results of Cycle II

Cycle II was conducted from October 21 to November 1, 2024, and consisted of four learning sessions. All planned improvements were successfully implemented. The “Village Health Center” theme involved roles such as doctor, nurse, patient, and pharmacist, while the “Jambi Malay Traditional Ceremony” theme included roles such as bride, groom, traditional elder, guest, and master of ceremonies. These themes effectively encouraged children to speak more frequently because they introduced richer vocabulary and more diverse communication situations.



Table 3. Observation Results of Children's Expressive Language Skills in Cycle II

No.	Category	Code	Number of Children	Percentage (%)
1	Not Yet Developed	BB	0	0
2	Beginning to Develop	MB	2	13
3	Developing as Expected	BSH	6	40
4	Developing Very Well	BSB	7	47
Total			15	100

Source: Cycle II observation data, October–November 2024.

Table 3 demonstrates a substantial improvement in children's expressive language skills. No children remained in the BB category, while 40% (6 children) achieved the BSH category and 47% (7 children) achieved the BSB category. Combined, 87% of the children reached either the BSH or BSB level, exceeding the predetermined success criterion of 75%. These findings indicate that the classroom action research successfully achieved its objectives.

Recapitulation of Improvements in Expressive Language Skills

To provide a comprehensive overview of children's expressive language development from the pre-cycle through Cycle II, the results were summarized and compared across all stages of the study.

Table 4. Recapitulation of Improvements in Children's Expressive Language Skills Across Cycles

Category	Code	Pre-Cycle (%)	Cycle I (%)	Cycle II (%)
Not Yet Developed	BB	40	20	0
Beginning to Develop	MB	33	33	13
Developing as Expected	BSH	20	33	40
Developing Very Well	BSB	7	14	47
BSH + BSB (Target $\geq$ 75%)		27	47	87

Source: Pre-cycle, Cycle I, and Cycle II observation data, 2024.

Table 4 illustrates a consistent and significant improvement across each cycle. The percentage of children categorized as BB decreased from 40% in the pre-cycle to 20% in Cycle I and finally to 0% in Cycle II. Meanwhile, the percentage of children categorized as BSB increased dramatically from 7% to 14% and then to 47%. The combined percentage of children achieving the BSH and BSB categories increased from 27% in the pre-cycle to 47% in Cycle I and reached 87% in Cycle II, surpassing the minimum target of 75%. These findings clearly demonstrate that the implementation of the role-playing method effectively improved the expressive language skills of children aged 4–5 years at Tunas Indah Kindergarten, Jambi City.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study consistently demonstrate that the implementation of the role-playing method significantly improved the expressive language skills of children aged 4–5 years at Tunas Indah Kindergarten, Jambi City. The improvement observed from the pre-cycle stage to Cycle II was substantial, with the percentage of children achieving the categories of Developing as Expected (BSH) and Developing Very Well (BSB) increasing from 27% to 87%, representing a gain of 60 percentage points. These findings support and strengthen several relevant theories and previous empirical studies concerning language development in early childhood.

From the perspective of Vygotsky's social constructivist theory, role playing is a highly interactive activity that promotes children's language development through social engagement. Within role-playing activities, children operate in the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), where they can achieve higher levels of understanding and performance with the assistance of more knowledgeable individuals (Bodrova & Leong, 2020). During the implementation of role-playing activities at Tunas Indah Kindergarten, teachers acted as scaffolding providers by offering language models, prompts, and encouragement, while more capable peers also contributed indirectly to the scaffolding process. These interactions created a rich and natural language-learning environment that aligns with Vygotsky's view of learning as a fundamentally social process.

Piaget's cognitive development theory also provides a theoretical explanation for the effectiveness of role playing among children aged 4–5 years. At the preoperational stage, children's symbolic thinking abilities are rapidly developing, enabling them to use symbols, words, and gestures to represent objects and events (Santrock, 2021). As a form of symbolic play, role playing offers an ideal opportunity for children to utilize and strengthen these representational abilities through language. When a child assumes the role of a doctor speaking to a patient, for example, language functions as a symbolic representation of reality while simultaneously reinforcing existing linguistic schemas within the child's cognitive structure.

The results of this study are consistent with previous research findings. Pratiwi and Setiawati (2021) reported significant improvements in the speaking abilities of children aged 5–6 years through role-playing activities at Dharma Wanita Kindergarten in Surabaya. Similarly, Hidayah, Rohman, and Fauzi (2022) found that role playing effectively



expanded children's active vocabulary. This finding was confirmed in the present study through field observations indicating substantial vocabulary growth, particularly after the implementation of the "Village Health Center" and "Jambi Malay Traditional Ceremony" themes during Cycle II. At the international level, Kim (2021) demonstrated that pretend play positively correlates with narrative development among preschool children in South Korea, which is consistent with the improvements in storytelling and retelling abilities observed in this study.

One of the most notable behavioral changes throughout the research process was the increase in children's confidence when speaking. During the pre-cycle stage, most children tended to remain silent or speak very softly when asked to communicate in front of teachers or peers. After Cycle I, children began to show greater willingness to participate, although many still required encouragement. By Cycle II, most children were able to initiate conversations spontaneously, speak with greater clarity and volume, and construct longer and more complex sentences. These findings support the conclusions of Kurniasih and Wahyuni (2023), who reported that role-playing activities significantly contribute to the development of young children's speaking confidence.

Vocabulary development also emerged as a major finding of the study. The use of diverse role-playing themes—including traditional markets, health centers, and cultural ceremonies—systematically introduced children to different vocabulary domains. Each theme provided unique and meaningful language exposure. The traditional market theme introduced transactional vocabulary such as "price," "change," and "bargaining"; the health center theme exposed children to basic medical vocabulary such as "medicine," "check-up," and "prescription"; while the traditional ceremony theme introduced culturally specific vocabulary associated with Jambi Malay traditions. This thematic approach supports the argument of Rowe and Snow (2020) that rich and varied language exposure within meaningful contexts is essential for vocabulary growth.

Significant improvements were also observed in children's ability to answer questions and express opinions. During the pre-cycle stage, most children responded using only one or two words. By Cycle II, the majority were able to answer questions using complete sentences consisting of four to seven words, and several children had begun using simple compound sentences. This development can be attributed to the nature of role-playing activities, which naturally require children to participate in dialogues and respond to questions or statements from others using more elaborate language.

Several factors contributed to the success of the intervention. First, the role-playing themes were closely related to children's daily lives and local cultural experiences, which enhanced their motivation to participate actively. Second, teachers adopted a supportive approach by modeling correct language use rather than directly criticizing children's language errors. Third, the classroom environment was warm, encouraging, and non-competitive. Finally, the systematic reflection process conducted after each cycle allowed for continuous improvement and adaptation of instructional strategies.

Despite the overall success of the intervention, several challenges were encountered. These included limited availability of role-playing materials and props, which required teachers to be highly creative in preparing learning resources; significant differences in children's initial language abilities, which made it difficult to provide equally appropriate scaffolding for all participants; and the continued developmental difficulties experienced by two children who remained in the Beginning to Develop (MB) category at the end of Cycle II. Further investigation revealed that these children exhibited mild speech difficulties that may require additional support from speech-language specialists.

The findings of this study have important practical implications for early childhood educators. First, role-playing activities should be integrated regularly into classroom instruction, ideally at least twice a week, as a primary strategy for stimulating expressive language development. Second, role-playing themes should be derived from children's daily experiences and cultural backgrounds rather than relying solely on generic topics, as familiar contexts have been shown to enhance motivation and participation. Third, teachers should develop a deeper understanding of each child's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) so that scaffolding can be tailored to individual needs and provided more effectively. By implementing these recommendations, early childhood education programs can create richer opportunities for children to develop expressive language skills in meaningful, enjoyable, and developmentally appropriate ways.

CONCLUSION

Based on the research results and discussion that have been outlined, it can be concluded that the implementation of the role-playing method effectively improves the expressive language skills of 4–5-year-old children at TK Tunas Indah, Jambi City. This improvement occurs consistently and significantly from the pre-cycle to Cycle II. In the pre-cycle, only 27% of children reached the category of Developing as Expected (BSH) and Developing Very Well (BSB). After the implementation of Cycle I, this percentage increased to 47%. By the end of Cycle II, the percentage of children reaching BSH and BSB reached 87%, far exceeding the minimum success criterion of 75% that had been set.

The success of the role-playing method in improving expressive language skills is due to the method's ability to create communication situations that are authentic, fun, and meaningful for children. Through role-playing, children actively engage in using language in real social contexts, which aligns with the principles of Vygotsky's social constructivist theory and Piaget's cognitive development theory. The dimensions of expressive language skills that improve include: confidence in speaking, vocabulary mastery and usage, the ability to answer questions with complete sentences, the ability to express opinions and ideas, as well as the ability to interact verbally with peers.





Based on these findings, the researchers recommend: (1) for early childhood education teachers, to regularly and systematically integrate role-playing methods into learning, by choosing themes relevant to the local cultural context and children's daily lives; (2) for school principals, to support the provision of adequate role-playing props and allocate sufficient learning time for role-playing activities; (3) for future researchers, to develop this research by involving larger samples, using a mixed-methods research design, or exploring the impact of role-playing on other developmental aspects such as emotional intelligence and early literacy skills; and (4) for early childhood education academics, to strengthen studies on developing role-playing methods that integrate local wisdom as a source of authentic language learning.

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