

Undergraduate Students' Perceptions of Project-Based Learning in an EFL Speaking for Academic Purposes Course

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Abstract: Project-Based Learning (PjBL) has gained attention in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction because it promotes active learning, collaboration, and authentic language use. Although previous studies have reported positive outcomes from PjBL, less attention has been given to how EFL students perceive its implementation in speaking courses and the challenges they experience during project completion in Indonesia. This study aimed to investigate students' perceptions of PjBL in a Speaking for Academic Purposes course and the challenges they encountered. A quantitative descriptive design with open-ended responses was employed. The participants were 39 pre-service teachers at Sriwijaya University. Data were collected through a 13-item questionnaire and three open-ended questions via Google Forms. Frequencies and percentages were used to analyze the responses, while open-ended responses were grouped into themes. The findings showed that students perceived PjBL positively. Specifically, 89.8% perceived improvement in speaking skills, 89.7% perceived improvement in creativity, and 87.2% perceived improvement in pronunciation. Speaking and English skill development (33.3%) and authentic learning experiences (25.6%) were the perceived strengths. However, students reported challenges in time management (46.2%), group coordination (20.5%), and language-related difficulties (17.9%). The most common suggestion was clearer instructions and guidelines (38.5%), followed by more time and flexible deadlines (28.2%) and lecturer guidance and feedback (15.4%). Overall, students perceived PjBL positively while emphasizing scaffolding, realistic timelines, and lecturer support.

Keywords: *Project-Based Learning, EFL Speaking, Speaking for Academic Purposes, Students' Perceptions, Pre-Service Teachers*

1. INTRODUCTION

Communication skills have become increasingly important for students, particularly those learning English as a foreign language. Speaking is especially important because it enables learners to share ideas and participate in classroom, social, and academic interactions (Richards, 2015). Effective speaking requires not only linguistic knowledge but also the ability to communicate messages clearly, accurately, and confidently in real-life situations (Brown, 2014). Therefore, speaking proficiency is widely considered an essential component of successful language learning.

Speaking remains challenging for many EFL learners. University students may experience limited vocabulary, pronunciation difficulties, grammatical problems, and low confidence. Prasetyo (2020) highlighted the importance of providing appropriate speaking activities to support learners' speaking development and address difficulties encountered during English speaking practice. In addition, speaking anxiety can prevent learners from expressing their ideas spontaneously during classroom interactions (MacIntyre, 2017). Recent research also shows that students' emotional experiences and anxiety can influence engagement and performance in English speaking contexts (Zhao et al., 2025). These

difficulties may reduce students' willingness to participate and limit opportunities for meaningful oral communication.

These challenges have encouraged educators to seek more engaging and student-centred approaches to speaking instruction. Traditional teaching practices that rely heavily on teacher explanations, memorization, and scripted dialogues may provide insufficient opportunities for authentic communication. Consequently, language teaching has increasingly shifted toward approaches that encourage active participation, collaboration, and real-world language use. One instructional approach that has received sustained attention is Project-Based Learning (PjBL).

Project-Based Learning is a learner-centered instructional approach in which students acquire knowledge and skills through collaborative engagement in meaningful projects that address authentic problems and result in tangible products (Thomas, 2000). Rather than positioning students as passive recipients of knowledge, PjBL encourages them to investigate issues, solve problems, collaborate with peers, and present their findings through various forms of communication. In language learning contexts, projects may include presentations, interviews, mini-research activities, digital storytelling, video production, podcasts, or other tasks that require extensive language use (Stoller, 2006).

The theoretical foundation of PjBL is rooted in constructivist learning theory, which views learning as an active process of knowledge construction through meaningful experiences and social interaction. Blumenfeld et al. (1991) argue that project-based activities facilitate deeper learning because students engage in inquiry, problem-solving, and authentic tasks that require them to apply knowledge in meaningful ways. Similarly, Krajcik and Blumenfeld (2006) explain that PjBL enables learners to connect classroom learning with real-world contexts while simultaneously developing higher-order thinking skills. Bell (2010) further emphasizes that PjBL supports the development of twenty-first-century competencies, including communication, collaboration, creativity, critical thinking, and learner autonomy.

Within EFL speaking courses, PjBL offers substantial pedagogical benefits. Through project completion, students are required to communicate with peers, conduct interviews, discuss ideas, gather information, and present project outcomes using English. Such activities provide repeated opportunities for learners to practise speaking in authentic situations rather than merely completing isolated classroom exercises. Beckett and Miller (2006) explain that project work creates meaningful contexts for language use because learners continuously negotiate meaning, share perspectives, and communicate ideas throughout the project process. More recent evidence also suggests that PjBL can support students' speaking performance, confidence, creativity, and engagement (Azzahra et al., 2025; Purnami & Widiadnya, 2024; Zhong et al., 2025).

A growing body of research has demonstrated positive contributions of PjBL to language learning. Sirisrimangkorn (2021) found that project-based presentation activities improved EFL undergraduates' speaking performance and participation. Purnami and Widiadnya (2024) likewise reported positive effects of PjBL on students' speaking performance and engagement, while Azzahra et al. (2025) found significant gains in EFL students' speaking performance together with increased confidence and engagement. More recent research has also examined multidimensional engagement in project-based speaking activities (Zhong et al., 2025). These studies provide useful evidence of PjBL's potential, but they do not fully explain how students in a specific university speaking course experience the benefits and practical difficulties of project implementation.

Although the effectiveness of Project-Based Learning has been widely documented, most previous studies have primarily focused on measurable learning outcomes such as speaking

achievement, language proficiency, critical thinking skills, and academic performance. Comparatively less attention has been given to how students experience and perceive the implementation of PjBL during the learning process. This issue is important because students' perceptions often influence their motivation, participation, engagement, and willingness to embrace innovative instructional approaches (Jiang & Zhang, 2021). Moreover, project implementation frequently involves challenges related to time management, group coordination, workload distribution, and technical difficulties that may not be adequately reflected in achievement scores alone.

Several studies have begun to investigate students' perceptions in various educational contexts. In EFL speaking research, students' perceptions have also been examined in relation to the use of digital learning tools, such as the Cake application, with findings highlighting learners' perspectives on speaking development (Anggreini et al., 2023). However, research specifically examining undergraduate students' perceptions of PjBL in EFL speaking courses remains relatively limited, particularly within the Indonesian higher education context. Existing studies tend to focus either on learning outcomes or on general perceptions of PjBL without exploring in depth the specific benefits and challenges experienced during speaking-related project activities. Furthermore, few studies have combined quantitative and qualitative evidence to provide a more comprehensive understanding of students' experiences throughout the project process.

Previous studies have provided evidence of the potential of Project-Based Learning (PjBL) in EFL speaking instruction. For example, Sirisrimangkorn (2021) examined the use of project-based presentation activities to improve undergraduate learners' speaking skills, while Purnami and Widiadnya (2024) and Azzahra et al. (2025) reported positive outcomes in students' speaking performance, confidence, and engagement. More recent research has also examined students' engagement in project-based speaking activities from a multidimensional perspective (Zhong et al., 2025). Although these studies provide evidence of the benefits and learning outcomes associated with PjBL, they primarily focus on speaking performance, learning outcomes, or engagement. Less attention has been given to students' perceptions of the implementation process itself, particularly their perceived strengths, practical challenges, and support needs when completing speaking projects. Moreover, evidence remains limited regarding how undergraduate EFL students experience PjBL specifically in Speaking for Academic Purposes courses within Indonesian higher education contexts. Recent research in the Indonesian EFL context has also examined technology-integrated PjBL in relation to students' learning engagement and English achievement (Marwa et al., 2026). However, such research has primarily focused on learning outcomes and engagement, leaving students' perceptions of the implementation process, including perceived strengths, practical challenges, and support needs, less explored.

Addressing this gap is important. Students' perceptions can provide insights into how project-based speaking activities are experienced in practice and what conditions may support or constrain their implementation. Therefore, the present study addresses this gap by combining quantitative evidence of students' perceptions of specific aspects of PjBL with qualitative evidence concerning perceived strengths, challenges, and suggestions for improvement. The study aims to investigate undergraduate students' perceptions of PjBL in an EFL Speaking for Academic Purposes course. Specifically, it examines students' perceptions of speaking and language development, confidence, creativity, motivation, engagement, and independent learning; identifies the challenges they encounter during project completion; and examines their suggestions for improving the implementation of PjBL in speaking instruction.

2. METHOD

This study employed a quantitative descriptive research design supplemented by open-ended responses to investigate undergraduate students' perceptions of the implementation of Project-Based Learning (PjBL) in an EFL Speaking for Academic Purposes course. A descriptive design was considered appropriate because the primary purpose of the study was to describe students' perceptions and response patterns without manipulating any variables (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). The quantitative component constituted the primary source of evidence and focused on students' levels of agreement with statements concerning perceived speaking and language development, confidence, motivation, creativity, engagement, and independent learning. The open-ended responses were used as supplementary qualitative evidence to provide additional contextual information about students' perceived strengths, challenges, and suggestions regarding PjBL implementation. The open-ended responses were analysed descriptively by grouping responses into recurring themes and calculating their frequencies and percentages. This supplementary analysis was used to enrich the interpretation of the quantitative findings by identifying issues that were not fully captured by the closed-ended items.

The participants were 39 fifth-semester undergraduate students enrolled in a Speaking for Academic Purposes course at Sriwijaya University. The participants were pre-service English teachers aged approximately 19–20 years. Total sampling was employed because all students enrolled in the course participated in the study, making the accessible population relatively small and fully available to the researchers (Etikan et al., 2016). The participants consisted of 31 female students (79.5%) and 8 male students (20.5%).

The Project-Based Learning (PjBL) implementation was conducted over a 16-week semester as part of the Speaking for Academic Purposes course. During the course, students participated in a series of project-based speaking activities, including mini-research projects, oral presentations, and video-production assignments. These activities required students to work collaboratively, gather information, communicate with respondents, prepare and present information in English, and produce project outputs. The projects therefore provided students with opportunities to use English for meaningful communicative purposes throughout the course.

The questionnaire was administered after the students had completed the project-based activities, allowing them to reflect on their experiences with PjBL. Their familiarity with the course activities and completion of the projects provided the contextual basis for reporting their perceptions of the strengths, challenges, and implementation needs associated with PjBL in speaking instruction.

Data were collected using a researcher-developed questionnaire consisting of 13 closed-ended items and three open-ended questions. The closed-ended items were measured using a five-point Likert scale: 1 = Strongly Disagree (SD), 2 = Disagree (D), 3 = Neutral (N), 4 = Agree (A), and 5 = Strongly Agree (SA). The items were designed to capture students' perceptions of several aspects of PjBL, including speaking and language development, confidence, motivation, creativity, engagement, and independent learning.

the questionnaire also included three open-ended questions designed to gather supplementary information regarding student's perceived benefits, challenges, and suggestions related to the implementation of Project-Based Learning in the Speaking for academic purpose course. While the closed-ended items provided quantitative data for identifying patterns, trends, and distributions of students' responses, the open-ended questions offered additional insights that helped enrich the interpretation of the findings (Creswell, 2023). The questionnaire was distributed online through Google Forms to facilitate data collection and ensure easy access for all participants.

The data obtained from the questionnaire were analysed using descriptive statistical techniques. The participants' responses on the five-point Likert scale were converted into numerical values to facilitate analysis. Frequencies and percentages were calculated for each response category to identify patterns and tendencies in students' perceptions of Project-Based Learning in the Speaking Course.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Students' Questionnaire Results

The questionnaire consisted of thirteen (13) items close-ended questionnaire and three (3) items open ended questionnaire designed to investigate students' perceptions toward the implementation of Project-Based Learning (PjBL) in Speaking for Academic Purposes course. The items examined students' perceptions toward PjBL, Strength, Challenges and Suggestions.

Section One: Profile of Participants

Table 1. *Pre-service Teachers' Gender*

Gender	Number (°)	Percentage (%)
Female	31	79,5
Male	8	20,5

As indicated in the results, thirty-one of the participants representing 79,5% are females while the 8 participants left represent 20,5% are males. This distribution indicates that female students constituted the majority of the participants involved in the study.

Section Two: Students' Perceptions toward Project-Based Learning in Speaking for Academic Purposes Course

This section presents the findings related to students' perceptions toward the use of PjBL in speaking course. Table 2 shows the distribution of responses across five items related to students' perception.

Table 2. *Students' perceptions toward the use of PjBL in speaking course*

No	Statement	Alternative Answer					Total
		SA	A	N	D	SD	
1	PjBL provides more opportunities to actively speak English	33,3%	48,7%	15,4%	2,6%	0%	100%
2	PjBL increases confidence in speaking English	28,2%	56,4%	12,8%	2,6%	0%	100%
3	PjBL improves pronunciation	35,9%	51,3%	12,8%	0%	0%	100%
4	PjBL improves	41,0%	48,7%	7,7%	2,6%	0%	100%

vocabulary use							
5	PjBL improves grammar use	35,9%	46,2%	15,4%	2,6%	0%	100%
6	PjBL improves ability to express opinions clearly	28,2%	61,5%	7,7%	0%	2,6%	100%
7	PjBL increases interest and motivation to learn speaking	30,8%	53,8%	12,8%	0%	2,6%	100%
8	PjBL improves speaking skills	30,8%	59,0%	7,7%	0%	2,6%	100%
9	PjBL develops ability to answer questions during presentations	25,6%	59,0%	12,8%	0%	2,6%	100%
10	PjBL increases confidence in communicating with respondents	35,9%	53,8%	7,7%	0%	2,6%	100%
11	PjBL enhances creativity	48,7%	41,0%	7,7%	0%	2,6%	100%
12	Students complete project tasks willingly and enthusiastically	30,8%	59,0%	7,7%	0%	2,6%	100%
13	PjBL promotes independent learning	35,9%	46,2%	15,4%	0%	2,6%	100%

Section Three: Students' Perceived Strengths of Project-Based Learning

This section presents the findings related to students' response to the strength of PjBL in speaking course. Table 3 shows the distribution of responses.

Table 3. *Student's perceived strength of PjBL*

Theme	Description	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Speaking and English Skill Development	Improving speaking, pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, and communication skills	13	33,3
Authentic Learning Experience	Using English in real-life situations and meaningful contexts	10	25,6
Creativity Development	Encouraging creativity, imagination, and innovation	6	15,4
Collaboration and Teamwork	Improving teamwork, communication, and cooperation skills	4	10,3
Confidence and Motivation	Increasing confidence, motivation, and classroom participation	4	10,3

Learner Autonomy and Critical Thinking	Promoting independence, responsibility, and critical thinking	2	5,1
Total		39	100

Section Four: Challenges of Project-Based Learning

This section presents the findings related to students' response to the challenges of the implementation PjBL in speaking course. Table 4 shows the distribution of responses.

Table 4. *Challenges of PjBL Implementation*

Theme	Description	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Time Management	Difficulty managing project deadlines, balancing projects with other assignments, procrastination	18	46,2
Group Coordination	Difficulty arranging schedules, unequal participation, different opinions among group members	8	20,5
Language-Related Difficulties	Problems with pronunciation, vocabulary, expressing ideas, academic words, nervousness while speaking	7	17,9
Technical Challenges	Editing videos, internet connection, software limitations, device problems	4	10,3
Task Understanding and Project Organization	Difficulty understanding instructions, organizing data, preparing scripts, structuring ideas	2	5,1
Total		39	100

Section Five: Project-Based Learning

This section presents the findings related to students' response to the suggestion of the implementation PjBL in speaking course. Table 5 shows the distribution of responses.

Table 5. *Suggestions for PjBL Implementation*

Theme	Description	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Clearer Instructions and Guidelines	More detailed explanations, examples, rubrics, and step-by-step instructions	15	38.5
More Time and Flexible Deadlines	Longer project duration and more reasonable deadlines	11	28.2
More Lecturer Guidance and Feedback	More monitoring, consultation, and project checkpoints	6	15.4
Better Group Management	Fairer task distribution and stronger collaboration	3	7.7

No Suggestions / Satisfied with Current Implementation	Students reported no suggestions for improvement	4	10.2
Total		39	100

The qualitative findings revealed that time management was the most frequently reported challenge during project completion (46.2%). Students often mentioned difficulties balancing project requirements with other academic assignments and meeting project deadlines. The second most common challenge was group coordination (20.5%), particularly difficulties in arranging schedules and reaching agreements among group members. Language-related difficulties (17.9%), such as pronunciation, vocabulary selection, and expressing ideas clearly in English, also emerged as important concerns.

Regarding the strengths of Project-Based Learning, the most frequently mentioned theme was speaking and English skill development (33.3%). Students believed that project activities provided meaningful opportunities to practice English and improve their communication skills. Authentic learning experiences (25.6%) also emerged as a major strength, as students appreciated the opportunity to use English in real-life situations rather than merely studying theoretical concepts. Furthermore, students highlighted creativity development (15.4%), collaboration (10.3%), confidence and motivation (10.3%), and learner autonomy (5.1%) as valuable outcomes of Project-Based Learning.

In terms of suggestions, the majority of students recommended clearer instructions and project guidelines (38.5%). Many participants stated that more detailed explanations, examples, and step-by-step guidance would help them better understand project expectations. Another frequently mentioned suggestion was providing more time and flexible deadlines (28.2%) to reduce workload pressure and improve project quality. Students also suggested increasing lecturer guidance and feedback throughout the project process (15.4%) to ensure that they remained on the right track during project completion.

DISCUSSION

This study contributes contextual evidence on how undergraduate EFL learners perceive PjBL specifically within a Speaking for Academic Purposes course. Across the 13 closed-ended items, the majority of students selected Agree or Strongly Agree, indicating favourable perceptions of PjBL's contribution to speaking development and the overall learning experience. These findings are consistent with previous research showing that project-based activities can support speaking performance, confidence, creativity, and engagement (Azzahra et al., 2025; Purnami & Widiadnya, 2024; Sirisrimangkorn, 2021; Zhong et al., 2025).

One of the most notable findings concerns the development of students' speaking competence. A total of 89.8% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that PjBL improved their speaking skills. High levels of agreement were also reported for vocabulary use (89.7%), expressing opinions clearly (89.7%), and pronunciation (87.2%). These findings suggest that project activities provided meaningful opportunities for students to use English in authentic communicative situations rather than merely practising isolated language forms. This result is consistent with the view that project work creates opportunities for meaningful language use and communication (Bell, 2010; Thomas, 2000) and with empirical evidence from EFL speaking contexts (Azzahra et al., 2025; Sirisrimangkorn, 2021).

Another important finding concerns creativity development. A total of 89.7% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that PjBL enhanced their creativity, and creativity was also identified as a major strength in the open-ended responses (15.4%). Students reported

that project activities encouraged them to generate ideas, design project outputs, and explore different ways of presenting information. This finding aligns with the constructivist perspective proposed by Blumenfeld et al. (1991), which views project work as a learning process involving inquiry, exploration, and creative problem-solving. It is also consistent with recent evidence that PjBL can promote creativity and learner engagement in EFL contexts (Azzahra et al., 2025; Purnami & Widiadnya, 2024).

The qualitative findings also revealed that students valued the authentic learning experiences provided by PjBL. Approximately one-fourth of the respondents (25.6%) identified authentic learning experience as a major strength. Students reported that project activities allowed them to use English for real purposes, such as conducting interviews, communicating with respondents, gathering information, and presenting findings. This finding supports Stoller's (2006) argument that project-based activities connect classroom learning with real-world communication. It also complements recent evidence that project-based speaking activities can strengthen students' engagement and participation (Purnami & Widiadnya, 2024; Zhong et al., 2025).

The results also indicate positive contributions to students' confidence, motivation, and independent learning. A total of 84.6% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that PjBL increased their confidence in speaking English, while 82.1% agreed or strongly agreed that it promoted independent learning. The open-ended responses further identified confidence and motivation (10.3%) and learner autonomy and critical thinking (5.1%) as perceived strengths. These findings are consistent with the view that project-based learning can support learner autonomy through planning, monitoring, and completing tasks toward shared goals (Krajcik & Blumenfeld, 2006). They also align with research showing that student engagement is influenced by learners' perceptions of the learning environment and opportunities for active participation (Jiang & Zhang, 2021; Zhong et al., 2025).

Despite these positive perceptions, the study also identified several challenges during project implementation. The most frequently reported challenge was time management, mentioned by 46.2% of participants. Students reported difficulties balancing project requirements with other academic responsibilities and meeting deadlines. This finding is consistent with recent evidence that project-based learning can involve substantial demands on students' time, planning, and sustained effort (Norsirah & Suseno, 2026). The finding suggests that students may require clearer project schedules, staged deadlines, and support in planning their workload.

The second most common challenge involved group coordination (20.5%), including difficulties in arranging schedules, dividing responsibilities, and managing differences among group members. Although collaboration is a central strength of PjBL, it can also become a source of difficulty when roles and communication are not clearly organized. Recent research on project-based speaking activities similarly highlights the importance of effective group processes and instructional structures in supporting engagement (Zhong et al., 2025). Therefore, effective collaboration requires clear role allocation, regular monitoring, and continuous communication among group members.

Language-related difficulties were also reported by 17.9% of participants. These difficulties included pronunciation, vocabulary use, nervousness while speaking, and expressing ideas using academic English. Interestingly, this qualitative finding complements the quantitative results, which showed that students perceived improvement in several of the same language areas. This suggests that PjBL may simultaneously provide opportunities for language development and make students more aware of the linguistic difficulties they still experience. Recent research on EFL speaking also emphasizes the importance of confidence,

emotional factors, and supportive learning conditions in students' speaking development (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2026; Zhao et al., 2025).

The students' suggestions provide additional insights into how PjBL can be implemented more effectively. The most common recommendation was clearer instructions and guidelines (38.5%), followed by more time and flexible deadlines (28.2%) and more lecturer guidance and feedback (15.4%). These responses indicate that students value project-based activities but need stronger scaffolding when completing complex tasks. Effective PjBL requires well-structured stages, clear expectations, appropriate assessment criteria, and teacher facilitation throughout the project process (Bell, 2010; Stoller, 2006). Accordingly, lecturers should provide detailed project instructions, assessment rubrics, regular feedback, and realistic deadlines.

Overall, the findings suggest that students perceived PjBL as a useful approach for supporting their speaking development, confidence, and engagement. The approach supported perceived speaking and language development while also promoting creativity, authentic language use, confidence, learner autonomy, and engagement. Nevertheless, the reported challenges related to time management, group coordination, language production, technical matters, and task organization show that positive perceptions do not eliminate implementation difficulties. These findings suggest that PjBL can be an effective approach for EFL speaking instruction when it is accompanied by clear scaffolding, realistic timelines, structured group management, and continuous lecturer support.

4. CONCLUSION

This study investigated undergraduate students' perceptions of the implementation of Project-Based Learning (PjBL) in a Speaking for Academic Purposes course at Sriwijaya University. The findings revealed generally positive perceptions. For example, 89.8% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that PjBL improved their speaking skills, 89.7% perceived improvement in creativity, and 87.2% perceived improvement in pronunciation. The open-ended responses further showed that students valued speaking and English skill development (33.3%) and authentic learning experiences (25.6%) as major strengths of PjBL. These findings suggest that project-based activities can provide meaningful opportunities for students to use English in authentic contexts while developing confidence, creativity, motivation, and learner autonomy.

Despite these positive perceptions, students reported challenges related to time management (46.2%), group coordination (20.5%), language-related difficulties (17.9%), technical challenges (10.3%), and task understanding and project organization (5.1%). Students most frequently suggested clearer instructions and guidelines (38.5%), more time and flexible deadlines (28.2%), and additional lecturer guidance and feedback (15.4%). The study should be interpreted in light of two main limitations: the relatively small sample of 39 students and the single-institution context, which limit the generalizability of the findings. In addition, no formal psychometric validation or reliability coefficient was established for the researcher-developed questionnaire, so the findings should be interpreted as descriptive evidence rather than evidence from a validated scale.

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. The relatively small sample of 39 students and the single-institution setting at Sriwijaya University limit the extent to which the findings can be generalized to other EFL higher education contexts. Moreover, the study relied on students' self-reported perceptions rather than direct measures of speaking performance. Future studies could therefore involve larger and more diverse samples across multiple institutions, employ validated instruments,

and examine whether students' perceptions are consistent with objectively measured speaking performance.

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