



Perceptions of Foreign Language Anxiety with Non-English Majors: A Case Study in a Chinese University

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ABSTRACT

The present study examines the perceptions of foreign language anxiety with 50 non-English majors in a Chinese university. All the students, in accordance with certain principles, were divided into two groups as high-level foreign language learners and low-level foreign language learners. Combining the quantitative and qualitative methods in this study, a FLCAS (Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale) questionnaire was administered to the students of each proficiency level to explore their foreign language anxiety and a semi-structured interview was conducted to 5 students of each level to acquire their perceptions and reasons behind perceptions. The results reveal that the foreign language anxiety is experienced by all the students of both high- and low-level. In addition, foreign language speaking anxiety is particularly prominent in both levels of the learners. The findings also indicate that the low-level foreign language learners experience much more anxiety than the high-level foreign language learners with various factors being cited as the contributing factors of this anxiety.

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1. INTRODUCTION

A great deal of research has been undertaken to study proficiency in foreign languages in recent years and learning a foreign language embodies cognitive as well as affective features on the part of the learners. Anxiety is one of the most frequently observed problems in relation to the affective domains in the language learning process and the psychological factors related to learning a new language have been a major focus [1,2,3,4]. In the “social psychological model” [5] cognitive factors such as language aptitude, intelligence and affective factors including attitude and motivation have been emphasized. Gardner and MacIntyre [4] have proposed that the foreign language learning process is involved with many affective variables like efficacy, empathy, and introversion. Among all the affective variables, anxiety has played an important role in the study of foreign language learning [6]. Horwitz [7] has noted that for most learners, mild foreign language anxiety is helpful to promote foreign language learning, while the medium and high levels of foreign language anxiety interfere with foreign language learning. Oxford [8] has also proposed that high-level language anxiety not only gives rise to learners’ poor grades but also causes a loss of confidence and self-esteem.

Most of the studies on foreign language anxiety have revealed that anxiety can impede foreign language achievement and its production. According to Campbell and Ortiz [9], almost one half of all language students experience a startling level of anxiety. Language anxiety is experienced by learners of both foreign and second language and poses potential problems “because it can interfere with the acquisition, retention and production of the new language” [10]. In China however, sufficient research hasn’t been conducted to address how foreign language learners experience foreign language learning anxiety. Therefore, the present study aims to address the differences of the foreign language learners’ perceptions towards foreign language anxiety with non-English majors in a Chinese university.

1.1 Literature Review

There are many definitions of “anxiety” - “anxiety is a psychological construct, commonly

described by psychologists as a state of apprehension, a vague fear that is only indirectly associated with an object” [11]. Ellis [12] has stated that anxiety can be divided into two types - i.e., facilitating anxiety and debilitating anxiety. Facilitating anxiety is said to be motivating to the learners in putting efforts into the language learning process while debilitating anxiety is the type of anxiety that causes learners to avoid the language learning process [13]. Sajedi [14] has proved that facilitating anxiety produces positive effects on performance, while too much anxiety may cause poor performance. However, in the research conducted by Scovel [15], it was suggested that anxiety has always been the obstacle among all kinds of learning processes and that there is a negative relationship between the language anxiety and achievement. That is, the higher the anxiety, the lower the performance. As a matter of fact, the students may perform better even though they suffer some anxiety or nervousness when they learn other skills. The problems occur when they are in the process of foreign language learning which can make them become more stressed and they may get the trouble of “mental block” [7]. Many scholars have proposed that foreign language anxiety has mainly contributed to the learners’ inability in the mastering of foreign language [16,17,18,19,20].

1.2 Foreign Language Anxiety

Anxiety has been found to interfere with many types of learning but when it is associated with learning a second or foreign language, it is termed as “second language anxiety or foreign language anxiety”. It is a complex and multidimensional phenomenon. Horwitz et al. [2] have defined foreign language anxiety as “a distinct complex of self-perceptions, feelings and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process” and were the first to conduct detailed research into the language learning process with the help of the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) which they designed themselves. Foreign language anxiety has been related to various poor outcomes that can be classified as physical, psychological or social [21,22,23]. Physical symptoms include rapid heartbeat, dry mouth, and sweating. Psychological symptoms include fear, embarrassment, poor memory recall and feelings

of helplessness. Social symptoms include negative behaviors, for example, unwillingness to participate, absenteeism, and withdrawal from the course. These symptoms have damaging influences on the learners' achievements [24]. Andrade and Williams [24] have examined the factors of foreign language anxiety and identified some situational variables such as course activities, course level, course organization and teacher's behaviour. Apart from situational variables, they have also investigated gender, learning style and personality factors that also have influences on foreign language anxiety. Young [25] has argued that foreign language anxiety is a complex and multidimensional phenomenon. He devised a new questionnaire to assess anxiety levels and implemented more systematic studies in class. Dalkilç [26] has explored the relationship between the students' foreign language anxiety levels and their achievements in speaking courses with the FLCAS designed by Horwitz et al. [2]. In Dalkilç's [26] study, 126 Turkish freshman EFL learners were recruited as participants and the findings of the study indicated that there was a significant relationship between the students' anxiety levels and their success in speaking classes. In addition, female students were more anxious during oral communication. Research conducted by Öztürk and Gürbüz [6] focused on some personality factors including extroversion, self-esteem, motivation, and anxiety. They discovered that among all the personality factors, anxiety is a huge stumbling block to foreign language learning. Thus it can be seen, in the area of foreign language learning, anxiety related research has been a long term focus.

1.3 Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety

In the four basic skills of foreign language learning, speaking has been identified as the most anxiety-provoking one. Horwitz et al. [2] have defined three different kinds of anxieties connected with foreign language anxiety including communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation and test anxiety. They also have identified communication apprehension to be conceptually relevant to foreign language anxiety. Among many other researchers, Price [27] according to her own students has claimed that in the foreign language learning process the most anxiety producing thing for the students is to speak a certain target language in front of peers. Palacios [28] also has presented similar findings that speaking triggers more anxiety for learners than other occasions. Saltan [29] has

implemented the research about foreign language speaking anxiety from the learners' and the teachers' points of view. Saltan [29] highlighted that all the learners experienced a certain degree of foreign language speaking anxiety. Mohamad and Wahid [30] have identified that testing, especially in oral performance, and being called on in class without being prepared to answer, are other factors that lead learners to shake and sweat. As a result, students try to avoid eye-contact with their teachers, fearing that the teachers might ask them a question even if it is about a topic that has been discussed earlier. Furthermore, Balemir [31] has experimented with Turkish EFL university students and put forward that all the students suffered from a moderate-level of speaking anxiety. Ay [32] in her study, demonstrated that learners' anxieties occur when they are required to speak without being prepared in advance. In China, the studies on foreign language speaking anxiety have also aroused some concern in the field of foreign language learning. Chen [33] has completed research on senior high school students in foreign language classrooms and the results show that there is a negative relationship between foreign language speaking anxiety and foreign language speaking performance. Wu et al. [34] have applied psychological methods to study foreign language speaking anxiety and the study revealed that foreign language speaking anxiety always produced negative influences. In addition, males are more likely to feel anxious than females when they are speaking a foreign language. Guo and Xu [35] made a comprehensive study about four basic English skills. In the analysis of speaking ability, the results illustrated that a lack of confidence is the most commonly cited reason causing foreign language speaking anxiety.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The participants of the study were the sophomore-level students in Hebei University of Hebei Province, China. There were 50 participants who majored in engineering mechanics including 44 males (88%) and 6 females (12%) in the same grade and all the participants had to take 4 class hours of English in one week taught by the same teacher. Of the 4 class hours, two were assigned to writing and reading, and the remaining two were assigned to speaking and listening.

Among all the students, the groups of high-level foreign language learners and low-level foreign

language learners accounted for half of each group. Three criteria distinguish between the high and low anxiety groups: the first criterion is on the basis of their English scores in the university entrance exam. In China, the full marks of the university entrance examination are 150. In this study the high-level foreign language learners all gained the university entrance exam scores above 130 and the low-level ones gained scores below 90; The second criterion takes the results of CET-4 (College English Test-4) as a reference which is a kind of examination designed for the non-English majors to test their English proficiency in all Chinese colleges and the participants who passed the CET-4 were high-level foreign language learners and those who failed this exam were low-level ones; the third criterion is based on the semester examination evaluation and the English classroom learning integrated performance. The boundary scores between the high and low are 60. Here is the participants' distribution presenting the male and female frequency and the distribution of different levels of foreign language learners in Table 1.

Table 1. Participants' distribution

Participants	Frequency	%
Male	44	88
Female	6	12
High-level foreign language learners	25	50
Low-level foreign language learners	25	50

This study combines quantitative and qualitative methods to collect data. Firstly, a questionnaire of FLCAS designed by Horwitz et al. was used to test the students' foreign language anxiety. Secondly, in order to find their perceptions towards foreign language anxiety and to know some detailed information behind the data, a qualitative method of semi-structured interviews was conducted by interviewing 5 volunteers from each level. Through the interview, 5 types of foreign language learning anxieties have been identified and some concrete data have also been identified in the following discussion.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Data Analysis of FLCAS

The data that was gathered via questionnaire of FLCAS has been converted to empirically

verifiable numerical values. For this purpose, the numerical values of +5, +4, +3, +2, and +1 were respectively assigned to strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, and strongly disagree. However some questions in the questionnaire were negative judgments, so the numerical values were also ranked to the contrary with +1, +2, +3, +4 and +5, which correspond with strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, and strongly disagree. To facilitate the statistics, the SPSS Version 17.0 was used to do some statistical processes. In this questionnaire, the higher the mean value is corresponding to the higher the anxiety. For each question, the corresponding mean value of high- and low-level foreign language learners is presented in Table 2.

3.2 Findings from the FLCAS

The data above shows that both the high- and low-level foreign language learners have experienced foreign language anxiety. As a whole, the results corresponded with the former studies that indicated negative correlations between foreign language anxiety and performance [15,36] but not completely. There is a clear exception that the mean value of question 11 (Q11) in high-level foreign language learners is even higher than low-level foreign language learners, which is 3.12:1.60. An analysis of the data shows that most mean values of the high-level foreign language learners are below 3.00 accounting for 97% except Q11 with the mean value of 3.12. As for the low-level foreign language learners, the mean values of the questions in FLCAS are much higher than the high-level ones in general and the majority of the mean values in the low-level foreign language learners are above 3.00 accounting for 88% with the highest one of Q22.

It is very interesting to note that the highest mean value in the low-level foreign language learners is the lowest one in the high-level foreign language learners of Q22. Coincidentally, the highest mean value of high-level foreign language learners corresponds with the lowest one in the low-level foreign language learners of Q11. It is also notable to see that for both levels of foreign language learners, the anxieties related to "speaking" are prominent in Table 2, which means both high- and low-level foreign language learners are confronted with some level of foreign language speaking anxiety.

Table 2. Data collection of FLCAS

Question number	High-level foreign language learners		Question number	Low-level foreign language learners	
	Mean	SD		Mean	SD
11	3.12	0.71	22	4.48	0.70
7	2.68	0.84	18	4.44	0.57
16	2.56	0.75	23	4.40	0.69
15	2.52	0.81	33	4.36	0.56
10	2.52	0.94	17	4.24	0.71
2	2.40	0.85	19	4.20	0.49
26	2.20	0.57	20	4.16	0.73
20	2.08	0.74	26	4.12	0.71
8	2.00	0.80	7	4.12	0.71
17	1.92	0.80	1	4.08	0.63
25	1.92	0.39	8	4.08	0.80
9	1.80	0.75	31	4.08	0.63
21	1.76	0.65	10	4.04	0.60
1	1.68	0.84	29	4.04	0.77
31	1.68	0.61	12	4.00	0.63
27	1.64	0.79	4	4.00	0.63
29	1.64	0.62	25	4.00	0.69
33	1.60	0.57	15	3.96	0.72
32	1.56	0.64	5	3.96	0.77
30	1.52	0.64	6	3.92	0.69
13	1.48	0.64	14	3.92	0.63
3	1.40	0.50	28	3.88	0.65
12	1.32	0.47	21	3.84	0.61
28	1.32	0.61	2	3.40	0.80
14	1.28	0.53	30	3.24	0.99
4	1.24	0.42	16	3.20	0.80
6	1.24	0.51	24	3.20	0.89
19	1.24	0.42	3	3.16	0.88
23	1.24	0.42	27	3.12	0.91
5	1.20	0.40	9	2.92	0.84
18	1.16	0.37	13	2.92	1.01
24	1.16	0.37	32	2.92	0.84
22	1.12	0.32	11	1.60	0.69

3.3 Analysis of 5 Types of Anxieties

Horwitz et al. [2], being the first scholars turning to language learning anxiety, explored speaking anxiety in relation to foreign language anxiety. Resting upon some empirical data and background evidence, they developed a theory on language learning anxiety which contains three interrelated components: 1) communication apprehension defined as a type of shyness characterized by fear of or anxiety about communicating with people; 2) fear of negative evaluation which refers to the apprehension about others' evaluation; 3) test anxiety is exemplified as a type of performance anxiety stemming from a fear of failure. In this paper, a much more specific classification according to the reasons that give rise to the students' foreign language anxiety has been made.

In the FLCAS questionnaire, 5 types of foreign language anxieties are covered. The anxiety of communication refers to the unnatural lack of confidence in the learners of the learners when they speak in or out of class; the anxiety of negative evaluation comes to work when the learners underperform relative to their expectation; the anxiety of test for the learners is the dissatisfactory or nervous attitudes towards the form related to tests or the test results; the anxiety of interaction with teacher mainly refers to the activities going on between the teacher and the learners, such as question and answer, taking turns to respond to questions; the anxiety of knowledge input talks about the occasions where the learners have trouble understanding the teacher's meaning or have difficulties in the acceptance of new knowledge.

In the light of the contents of the questions in FLCAS, the questions related to the 5 types of anxieties are presented in Table 3.

The data on the 5 types of anxieties with the high- and low-level foreign language learners is presented in Table 4.

Table 4 shows each of the 5 types of anxieties. The high-level foreign language learners experience less anxiety than the low-level foreign language learners. Relatively speaking, in all the 5 types of anxieties, the high-level foreign language learners feel most anxious about communication and least anxious about knowledge input which indirectly indicates that the high-level foreign language learners concentrate more on the classroom when absorbing knowledge and work harder to digest the knowledge but they still experience inability to adequately express their complete meaning in practice. For the low-level foreign language learners, anxiety of communication is the highest one with the mean value of 3.99. Table 4 illustrates that foreign language learners of both levels are faced with some level of anxiety when communicating. The reason for this phenomenon is that in China, English proficiency is often appraised by written tests and the appraisal system focuses less on the speaking skills. Next to the anxiety of communication, the anxiety of interaction with teacher and the anxiety of knowledge input are ranked with a small gap in the low-level foreign language learners which imply that they have problems in focusing on the class. This may be the result of apathy about learning foreign language or they dislike the

teacher. In all types of anxieties, the low-level foreign language learners have least anxiety about the test. However, anxiety about the test takes the second place in the high-level foreign language learners.

On the whole, from the detailed classification, there indeed exists different types of foreign language anxieties with the high- and low-level foreign language learners and both of them are faced with significant foreign language speaking anxiety. Nevertheless, why do such situations arise? In order to address this very issue, a semi-structured interview was conducted.

3.4 Data Analysis of the Interview

The purpose of the interview is aimed at understanding the following questions:

1. What are the reasons that cause the foreign language speaking anxiety?
2. Why do the low-level foreign language learners have difficulties in the knowledge input process?

In order to investigate the above two questions, 5 volunteers were respectively selected in each group of the high- and low-level foreign language learners and for convenience of taking notes, the high-level students joining the interview were marked as high-level student A which is abbreviated as HSA, then HSB, HSC, HSD and HSE. Correspondingly, the low-level students were abbreviated as LSA, LSB, LSC, LSD and LSE.

Table 3. Categorization of questions

Types of anxiety	Question number
Anxiety of communication	Q1, Q7, Q8, Q15, Q17, Q20, Q25, Q26, Q27
Anxiety of negative evaluation	Q9, Q10, Q11, Q19, Q23, Q23, Q31, Q33
Anxiety of test	Q14, Q16, Q32
Anxiety of interaction with teacher	Q2, Q4, Q12, Q21
Anxiety of knowledge input	Q3, Q5, Q6, Q13, Q18, Q22, Q28, Q29, Q30

Table 4. Data on 5 types of anxieties

Types of anxiety	High-level foreign language learners mean	Low-level foreign language learners mean
Anxiety of communication	2.07	3.99
Anxiety of negative evaluation	1.80	3.60
Anxiety of test	1.80	3.35
Anxiety of interaction with teacher	1.68	3.81
Anxiety of knowledge input	1.34	3.78

Many scholars mentioned that speaking is the most anxiety-provoking aspect of the foreign language learning process [27,28], because speaking has its own features different from other skills. For example, the “output” of the other three skills such as reading, listening and writing is fulfilled by a more private space and allows the learners in a peaceful environment to think about the content but speaking always happens in a public space and in most occasions it needs the learners to make an immediate response that can enhance the anxious feeling of the learners. In addition to the objective factors, after the interview, it was found that the main reasons causing the anxiety of the high- and low-level foreign language learners are not the same.

High level language learners have fewer reasons for speaking anxiety than occur with low level speakers (e.g., limits on vocabulary, lack of grammar knowledge). Most of them are worried about whether their utterances are easy to understand and they may be embarrassed by an awkward silence when they finish speaking in a foreign language. As the interviewee HSB stated:

I remembered the experience after I communicated extensively with a foreigner who asked me directions, finally I saw a face full of bewilderment and hopelessness. At that time, I felt so awkward and disappointed to myself. However in fact I can perform well in other skills but I'm not sure of my ability in my oral speaking.

The HSD also gives another reason that the speaking ability came to the classroom only after she entered the college. This interview provides some insights into why the high-level foreign language learners are most anxious about communication. It is because of the insufficient learning periods and practice of English speaking that most of them don't have enough confidence to communicate with others.

Secondly, the interviews with high-level foreign language learners also shows that there is a common problem that they mostly established very high standards for judging the quality of their own spoken communication. They hope they can perform as perfectly as possible; however the results sometimes can be unsatisfactory or even worse. These unsatisfactory results may be caused if speakers are too cautious to have ideal states especially when they are taking exams or speaking in an immediate situation. When asked about why they have so much concern about

their performance, some interviewees responded that they set standards for themselves and some others say that they are required to perform at their best by parents or teachers. The learners don't want to disappoint them like the HSC has explained:

Because my classmates, my parents and teachers all think highly of me and I really don't want to let them down, I try all my best to do everything well but sometimes I don't think that's my strengths or in other occasion like I need to speak out without enough preparation will make me nervous and anxious ...

After interviewing with the high-level foreign language learners, it can be concluded that whether they are required by themselves or their parents, they are willing to satisfy themselves or others and they are under pressure of avoiding negative evaluation both from themselves and from others. Horwitz et al. [2] have pointed out the role of students' beliefs (e.g., remaining silent and reluctant to speak until fluency in the foreign language is established) in increasing their anxiety levels. The reason of this silence is mostly because students fear to make errors and as a result get corrected by the teacher in front of their classmates. Therefore, it's easy to understand why the anxiety of negative evaluation ranks in the second place in high-level foreign language learners.

By interviewing the low-level students, we found that 3 of the 5 interviewees have negative attitude towards foreign language learning. They think learning English is boring and they're not able to concentrate on listening to the teacher in English class when they start learning English. The LSA and LSD both mentioned that they enjoy having science subjects such as math, physics and chemistry. These participants felt that they preferred these classes because there are lots of challenging problems needed to be solved in science classes which can make them excited, and when they worked out the correct answers they strongly felt the sense of achievement. The SLC stated that he dislikes English which he thinks is a girl's subject, because when he starts learning English, the girls' performance in his class is much better than the boys. The other two do hold positive attitudes toward learning English. For example SLB says he thinks English is very useful but he is incapable of understanding and mastering what the teacher says on class. Another participant liked English songs and movies best,

however he is so confused about learning English grammar which caused his poor performance in tests and resulted in his reluctance to speak English.

Through careful analysis of the interview the reasons why the low-level students have difficulties in knowledge input can be determined. For most of them, they lack interest in learning English which results in passive learning. There is also a thinking set held by some boys that the girls are the best learners in foreign language and they regard it as a fact then take it for granted. Meanwhile such thinking makes them indifferent to learning. For the learners who are interested in learning English, what they need are appropriate ways to learn the language. In the interview, the SLB also suggests that he doesn't know how to learn English and what he usually does is to memorize what the teacher taught in class but it's far from efficient and it always makes him so tired.

Since the low-level foreign language learners have problems in knowledge input, it is rather simple to explain why they have poor performance in knowledge output. The low-level interviewees have mentioned many times that they can't think of the right vocabulary to say a simple sentence and they can't understand how English grammar works when they take exams. As an alternative, taking private exams may afford the students chances to determine the right answers as they think speaking in public increases the difficulty. In other conditions, although the low-level students know how to express meaning with the known words, they may also feel low confidence when they speak. The low-level students' attitudes towards the test are much more relaxed, because most of them care less about the test results as LSA answered:

Before I take the exam, I have foreseen the result is just as usual except I'm lucky enough to have a supernormal performance.

So for low-level students, they have a relatively eased requirement on the test results but they feel more difficult in speaking because they lack enough speaking knowledge and lack confidence to speak out.

Table 4 shows another contrast that the high- and low-level students have different responses to the anxiety of interaction with the teacher. From the interviews with both levels of learners, it is found that the high-level foreign language learners take delight in seeking help from their

teacher but they may get anxious when the teacher asks them tricky problems they are not prepared to address. However the low-level foreign language learners dare not to ask for help from the teacher on their own initiative because most of them have suffered criticism of the teacher particularly when they perform poorly in class.

3.5 Overall Summary

In this study, it can be seen that although students of both high- and low-level learners experience foreign language anxiety, in general, the high-level students bear less anxiety than the low-level ones. Furthermore, we can assume that the feeling of accomplishment leads to a decrease in the anxiety which is a finding that supports one of the important findings discussed earlier by Horwitz [7].

Based on the analysis of this study's interviews it can be seen that there is a decrease in the students' feelings of anxiety that can be attributed to what students have mentioned during the interview. One of the issues that the students have referred to was whether they were allowed to prepare. The students have mentioned that without preparation they may become anxious as was also indicated in Mohamad and Wahid's [30] study, but contradicts the findings revealed in Wörde's [37] study.

As another important finding, foreign language speaking anxiety is suffered by both levels of the students. The result is consistent with the former studies that have proved that speaking is the most anxiety-provoking one in the language learning process [27,28,29]. The reasons why both levels of the students have foreign language speaking anxiety can be generalized. On one hand, foreign language speaking has its own features in the learning process. On the other hand, Chinese traditional foreign language teaching methods emphasize more of the written examination scores and pay less attention to speaking skills in traditional foreign language classrooms. Beyond that, the inadequate learning periods and practices for the speaking skills also contribute a lot to cause foreign language speaking anxiety. As for the high-level foreign language learners, they lack confidence in speaking. For the low-level foreign language learners, they not only lack speaking confidence but also have difficulties in acquiring knowledge to speak out.

4. CONCLUSION

This paper provides information for the high- and low-level foreign language learners about the anxiety state during foreign language learning which reveals that they have different psychological feelings from common causes of anxiety to the learners. Therefore, this study can inspire learners to realize the disadvantages of foreign language anxiety and handle it correctly. It is recommended that they form a positive attitude towards language acquisition and establish realistic expectations. It is also recommended that they actively seek help from teachers or classmates to cope with the anxiety. In addition, for both levels of the foreign language learners, they all should build up their learning confidence in English. The most important thing for the low-level foreign language learners is that they should develop a set of suitable and useful English learning methods by themselves or with the help of others.

To conclude, the present study has deepened our understanding of foreign language anxiety, and uncovered some ideas for the teachers such as focusing more on the anxiety reducing strategies and finding the actual factors affecting the students' foreign language study results. In doing so, the learners will be able to improve their foreign language learning achievement. Furthermore, in China, the teacher should pay more attention to the speaking skills with some creative and targeted methods.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Author has declared that no competing interests exist.

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