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Review paper

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APPLYING THE SITUATIONAL APPROACH IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE COMMUNICATION WITH CHILDREN IN PRESCHOOL INSTITUTIONS: AN OVERVIEW

The paper addresses the problem of foreign language communication in preschool institutions. The processes of L1 and L2 acquisition undergo similar stages, which facilitates acquisition of a foreign language at a young age. There are many advantages of learning a foreign language at a young age, the most important being children's brain plasticity and the flexibility of their speech apparatus. The Situational Approach to foreign language learning ensures learning L2 is a pleasurable experience for children, one that should aim at freedom of language choice, establishing an optimal learning environment, and imitation of L1 learning mechanisms. It is very important that educators are proficient in the foreign language that they are teaching, that they are able to sustain an enjoyable atmosphere in the preschool institution and that they promote cooperation with other children in a playgroup, as well as the children's parents. The paper provides an overview of the most important points of communication in a foreign language with children of an early age. It also emphasises the importance of the continuity of learning foreign languages, from preschool institutions up to the university level. Such an approach makes it possible for learners to achieve a high level of fluency in a particular language at an adult age and empowers them to build a successful career in their chosen field.

Key words: language choice; preschool institution; educator; Situational Approach

1. INTRODUCTION

In order to cope with the hectic pace of modern life, it is of utmost importance to be fluent in at least one foreign language. This is particularly important in the context of one's future career advancement and educational opportunities. In Croatia, foreign languages are taught as early as in preschool institutions, which offer full-day and half-day foreign language programmes to children of an early age. Many children attend language learning programmes in preschool institutions, in particular English language programmes. English is subsequently taught from the first grade of primary school, throughout secondary school and up to the university level.

Young children learn foreign languages differently than adults do – they learn them spontaneously, through play, with a lot of interaction with their educators, peers and with their parents. In Croatia, formal and structured contexts for learning a foreign language are being abandoned, with more contemporary approaches gaining popularity. The *Situational Approach* to teaching a foreign language provides an optimal opportunity for young children to learn the language in daily situations such as arriving at kindergarten, getting ready for lunch, etc. The foreign language is learnt in a similar way as the mother tongue. The learning mechanisms of the mother tongue and foreign language will be elaborated on, with emphasis on the characteristics of young children that facilitate the process of language learning. The focus will be on the communication aspect of the Situational Approach to learning. The communication principles of the Situational Approach will be specially addressed, with an emphasis on the importance of continuous communication with educators, peers and parents.

2. THE CHILD'S COMMUNICATION WITH THEIR ENVIRONMENT

Children are exposed to language from the moment of their birth. Communication between the child and the people from their environment is bidirectional from the very start. At the beginning, the child establishes affective communication with the people in the immediate surrounding by utilising diverse means of affective communication, such as gestures, facial expressions, and look (Silić 2007a). Affective bidirectional communication leads to social bidirectional communication and to the formation of early communicative competence (Silić 2007a). Brewster and co-authors (Brewster et al. 1994: 696) define it as

“... knowledge that users of a language have internalised to enable them to understand and produce messages in the language...it [communicative competence] entails both linguistic competence (for example, knowledge of grammatical rules) and pragmatic competence (for example, knowledge of what constitutes appropriate linguistic behaviour in a particular situation)”.

Affective communication is a prerequisite for semiotic communication. While affective communication is based on expression, semiotic communication is rooted in denotation and primarily relays information about the environment. The role of the adult is crucial at this stage, since it is through the adult that the child is introduced to the cultural and social systems of semiotic communication (Silić 2007a). Silić distinguishes another mode of pre-semiotic (non-verbal) communication, and that is practical-situational communication, which is conducted via mutual activities of adults and children in the form of exchange of cognitive meanings and messages within the child’s environment (Silić 2007a). Through this kind of communication, the child learns about the meaning of practical actions, while creating its first verbal expressions. Verbal communication is at first related to a particular context, and only at a later stage does it obtain the character of independent codes.

The child’s verbal expression follows its cognitive development, which undergoes similar stages: at first it has an affective character, at a later stage it becomes situational in nature, while finally it obtains a verbal-logical character (Silić 2007a).

3. MOTHER TONGUE, SECOND LANGUAGE AND FOREIGN LANGUAGE

The child tries to replicate the information acquired from its environment with all of its senses (Kotarac 2017). In order to achieve that, children have to be continually stimulated by the speech models from their immediate environment. The child subsequently develops the ability to use language as an essential means of communication, thereby creating messages which enable them to sustain successful communication with adults (Selimović and Karić 2011). According to *the National Curriculum for Early and Preschool Education (Nacionalni kurikulum za rani i predškolski odgoj i obrazovanje)*, children actively acquire languages (mother tongue and foreign language) from a linguistically rich environment (*Nacionalni kurikulum za rani i predškolski odgoj i obrazovanje* 2014). The first language the child comes into contact with at the moment of birth is called *mother tongue, first language, source*

language or L1 (Kraš and Miličević 2015). Children acquire their mother tongue mainly from their mothers or other participants in the process of language development (Pavličević Franić 2005).

The language that the child acquires, in most cases later than they start acquiring their mother tongue, is either a *second language*, a *foreign language* or L2 with *second language acquisition* being the umbrella term that is used in English terminology for both foreign language and second language acquisition, point out Kraš and Miličević (2015). The main difference between second language and foreign language is, assert the authors, that the former is acquired in a natural environment where that language is spoken as the first language, while a foreign language is learnt outside such an environment (usually in the context of the classroom). According to Medved Krajnović and Juraga, second language acquisition is characterised by a person's spontaneous acquisition of a language spoken by speakers of a community with whom the person has regular interlinguistic contact. Those are, continue Medved Krajnović and Juraga, mainly situations where the speaker of a minority language acquires the language of the majority, for example, Croatian immigrants in the USA, who acquire English in that country (Medved Krajnović and Juraga 2008).

Foreign language learning (but also *foreign language acquisition*, *second language acquisition* or *second language learning*), stresses Medved Krajnović, is conducted in an institutionalised context, where the stress is on a *formal, structured* approach to the linguistic corpus, while the acquired language is not present in the nearer environment, such as, for example, Croats learning English in Croatian schools (Medved Krajnović 2010). Such an approach is not appropriate for teaching a foreign language to children of an early age since it is not advisable to pressure children to express themselves in a foreign language (Commission Staff Working Paper – European Strategic Framework for Education and Training European Commission 2011). To be more precise, children are encouraged to notice similarities between their mother tongue and the foreign language they are learning, thereby *freely* choosing which language they want to use (Commission Staff Working Paper – European Strategic Framework for Education and Training 2011). In this paper I intend to focus on a more contemporary approach to teaching a foreign language at an early age, namely the *Situational Approach*. In order to better understand the main principles of the Situational Approach to teaching foreign languages, it is necessary to elaborate on the stages and mechanisms of L1 and L2 acquisition.

4. STAGES OF L1 AND L2 ACQUISITION

Jean Brewster et al. (2004) distinguish between six stages through which children acquire their L1: 1) *babbling* (producing a wide array of noises and sounds), 2) *the first word* (naming objects and people, at the beginning sound combinations produced by chance, like *mama* or *dada*), 3) *two words* (putting two words together to create new meaning, ex. *look Daddy, Mummy gone*), 4) *phonological, syntactic and lexical norms* (grammatical norms resemble those of adults, basic language elements put in place, all vowel sounds and consonants acquired with minor problems in articulating some), 5) *syntactic and lexical complexity and richness* (continue to expand their vocabulary, unable to understand complex grammatical structures), and 6) *conversational skills* (may not understand directions, may carry on without showing lack of understanding or asking questions). The last stage, which corresponds to the onset of teenage years, marks the commencement of the independent and eloquent use of L1. These stages are phases of a spontaneous process of L1 acquisition. We can now pose the question whether it is possible to imitate these stages in L2 acquisition.

When it comes to learning foreign languages, Rod Ellis distinguishes three stages: 1) *the Silent Period*, 2) *Formulaic Speech* and 3) *Structural and Semantic Simplification* (Ellis 2024). Similar to L1 acquisition, during the Silent Period the child first listens to the speech of adults, gets familiar with it and memorises it (Devčić and Fišer 2023). During this period, the child is exposed to a foreign language but does not speak it (Ellis 1994). The child listens attentively, explores and becomes acquainted with the language, thereby creating their own inner speech (*private speech*). The child understands a lot, but cannot reproduce the same quantity of language and takes time to process it before reproducing it.

During the Formulaic Speech phase, the child learns ready-made phrases (for example *I don't know*), which they use in communication with other children. These phrases are usually connected with routines in the child's life. The acquisition of these phrases helps the child structure sentences in the future.

Finally, during the Structural and Semantic Simplification phase, the child uses simple words and joins them out of context, without applying grammatical rules (ex. *Clean floor*). This elliptic language is the result of the child's lack of knowledge of grammatical and linguistic structures in the target language (Ellis 1994). In order to facilitate the process of answering, Haynes (2021) advises parents to ask closed questions (Yes/No questions).

Scientists of diverse orientations in science have different views of the similarities and differences between the acquisition of the mother tongue and foreign language acquisition (Brewster et al. 2004). Thus behaviourists perceive the processes as similar due to two features common to both processes, i.e. practice and imitation. Cognitivists, on the other hand, emphasise that children learning a foreign language are cognitively more developed than children that are only learning their mother tongue. They explain this phenomenon with the fact that children start learning the lexical and grammatical structures of a foreign language once they have acquired them in their mother tongue. The proponents of the social interactionist view, on the other hand, emphasise that a foreign language, unlike the mother tongue, which we acquire spontaneously, is learnt in artificial conditions that have been set up especially for that purpose (Brewster et al. 2004). Besides the stages, it is important to elaborate on the language learning mechanisms of children of an early age.

5. HOW DO YOUNG CHILDREN LEARN FOREIGN LANGUAGES?

Young children are motivated to learn by their inherent curiosity to understand the world and obtain new knowledge (Šarčević 2017). Moreover, they quickly obtain diverse information (Kralj 2022). When it comes to learning foreign languages, children possess an inherent ability to spontaneously and effortlessly (unlike adults) pick up language by listening to adults from their environment (Šarčević 2017).

According to Eric Lenneberg (1967), the founder of the theory of the *Critical Period Hypothesis*, the ideal age to commence learning a foreign language is between the age of two and puberty. Lenneberg supports his notion by the fact that, during this period, children effortlessly internalise the structures of a foreign language, especially the rhythm, pronunciation and intonation, due to the plasticity of their brain and the flexibility of their speech apparatus. This in turn results in the near-native intonation and pronunciation (Prebeg Vilke 1990; Kralj 2020). This is the main reason why a number of linguists opine children should start learning foreign languages as soon as possible or, more precisely, during the preschool period (Lenneberg 1967; Pavličević Franić 2001; Singleton 1987).

6. CONTINUITY OF THE ACQUISITION OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES IN CROATIA – THE INSTITUTIONAL (FORMAL) CONTEXT

Children in Croatia are increasingly exposed to foreign languages for many reasons. In the era of the rapid development of technology, with distances between people becoming smaller and with an increased need for global communication, fluency in more than one language has become a must. This is the reason why a growing number of parents are enrolling their children in language programmes already at a preschool age. Children thus learn European and non-European languages within language programmes specialised for young children in whole-day or half-day programmes in kindergartens. Foreign language instruction is continued throughout their education, i.e. in primary school, secondary school and at university. Fluency in foreign languages significantly enhances careers, as well as helps develop a positive attitude towards diverse cultures, communities and languages (Šarčević 2017).

6.1. Institutional Learning Based on the Situational Approach

Compared to learning a foreign language at an adult age, when the process is deliberate and is often marked with the exhausting trait of memorising various language structures, foreign language learning at a young age utilises a wide array of characteristics all young children have, including playfulness, intrinsic motivation and spontaneity (Silić 2007a). Moreover, claims Silić, concrete actions undertaken by adults and children together accompanied by practical and situational communication arising from these actions set a pretext for successful foreign language learning. This learning is aided by the cognitive development of the child, which at first is of affective character and later obtains a situational and then abstract verbal and logical character (Silić 2007a).

The main aim of the *Situational Approach* is to make foreign language acquisition as similar to the acquisition of the mother language as possible. This approach was proposed by Jürgen Zimmer and its main principles are the following: 1) learning for life situations; 2) connecting social and concrete learning; 3) learning in groups consisting of children of different ages; 4) growing together; 5) cooperation of parents and adults; 6) cooperation with other preschool institutions and the community and 7) open planning (Zimmer 1984).

His approach relies on the fact that there are numerous similarities between the processes of L1 and L2 acquisition. Brewster et al. distinguish between four corresponding stages of the two processes: 1) working out how language works, 2) generalising across a group of similar instances, 3) over generalising or using rules where they are not appropriate (ex. saying *putted* or *goed* instead of *put* and *went*) and 4) using language items correctly (Brewster et al. 2004).

6.2. Kindergarten as a Setting for Foreign Language Learning

Preschool institutions play an important role in applying the Situational Approach to learning foreign languages, since they provide a setting that abounds in practical life situations in which children can talk about topics relevant to them, such as arrival at the preschool institution, changing clothes, playing with toys, eating routines and others (Silić 2007a). In this manner, there is no need to create artificial situations of play, but rather utilise the reality and everyday manner of living of preschool children (Ibidem). Additionally, such a natural way of foreign language acquisition is in accordance with the child's creative, active and spontaneous nature. In that manner, points out Silić, all practices that are not in accordance with the child's nature or which exert pressure or concern upon the child, are not likely to be embraced by the young learner (Ibidem).

In present-day Croatia, more and more parents are inquiring about the availability of foreign language programmes in kindergartens when enrolling their child in a preschool institution (Koporčić et al. 2023). As is reported by the authors, the languages most in demand are English, German and Italian.

The introduction of whole-day programmes, as well as half-day programmes for teaching foreign languages in Croatian preschool institutions paved the path for the implementation of a different and more natural manner of foreign language instruction. Thus, in 1992, the Ministry of Education, Culture and Sport launched language programmes in English, German, Italian and French. Fourteen Croatian kindergartens were involved in the initiative and 323 preschool children took part in a foreign language learning programme. The English programme was, continues Silić, particularly successful and showed that preschool children could successfully acquire the basics of a foreign language (Silić 2007a).

Kindergartens proved to be a good setting for foreign language learning, since teaching is conducted in a natural, appropriate manner. If, for example, the teacher praises the child's new jacket by saying *Your new blue jacket is beautiful*, the child

will connect the words with its own experience, which will open an emotional dimension and help it develop a positive attitude toward learning L2 (Silić 2007a). The natural way of foreign language learning thus brings to the surface the *affective* component of its cognitive growth. Children enjoy talking about topics relevant to them in such an environment, both in their mother tongue and foreign language (2007).

6.3. The Language Choice

Silić (2007a) emphasises that children equally enjoy their L1 and L2 in communication. Communication in L2 should be in accordance with the real nature of each child, continues Silić. It is of utmost importance that children are *not forced* to speak in L2, otherwise they may develop a negative attitude towards that language, which is difficult to rectify later on (Ibidem).

Despite the fact that children of an early age have a limited vocabulary in L2, they often desire to participate in foreign language classroom activities. According to Roy Vasta et al., pre-pubescent children are naturally active and like participating in various language activities (Vasta et al. 2005). If they are unable to maintain the conversation in L2, they are likely to sustain it in their L1.

In Croatia, it is not precisely defined whether and to what extent L1 should be used in the foreign language classroom (Carević 2010). Some teachers opine that the use of L1 when teaching L2 is unnecessary, or even detrimental since they believe that the use of L1 hinders the process of thinking in the foreign language (Petrović 1995). Others believe resorting to L1 is perfectly acceptable since children of an early age do not have a wide vocabulary range in L2 yet and therefore find it difficult to express themselves in the target language (Sironić Bonefačić 1992). According to Pavličević Franić, children instinctively try to communicate in different languages to their interlocutors and there is always a reason for their language choice (Pavličević Franić 2001).

Scientists (Moon 2005; Prebeg Vilke 1991) warn of the pitfalls we can fall into if pressure is exerted upon a child in its language choice, as well as of the consequences these pressures can have on the child. Childhood is a sensitive period in one's life and initial negative attitudes that can result from pressure related to language choice can mark a young person for the rest of their life.

6.4. Case Studies Related to Motivating Children to Use L2 Via Peer Support and Stimulating Environment

A stimulating environment is of utmost importance in foreign language learning, while the cooperation between younger and older children makes the process of foreign language learning faster (Fućak and Vujičić 2013). The structure of a child's interaction and communication significantly changes with the commencement of preschool education in a preschool institution (Miljak 1987). According to Miljak (1987), the quantity and quality of speech directed towards the child changes, while the child's communication with peers and older children increases. Gopnik et al. (2003) point out that a growing number of scientists agree that older children are very successful in teaching foreign languages to their younger friends. Utilising these opportunities in the context of teaching a foreign language at the institutional level gives room for monitoring and documenting these activities by preschool teachers.

Activities related to peer support of a mixed-age group of children were monitored in the kindergarten *Podmurvice* in Rijeka. The children were involved in the language learning programme in which Italian was taught as a foreign language. New arrivals had not learnt Italian before. One of them was a three-year old girl who missed her mother. Older children in the group tried to soothe her by feeding her soup. When that did not work, the older children started singing the Italian song *La canzone della felicità* (*The Happiness Song*) and the girl cheered up (Fućak and Vujičić 2013). In this manner, children who are new in the playgroup can be exposed to the new language with the help of their peers, not only adults.

Another episode in the same kindergarten refers to an educator asking a girl a question in Italian (*Come ti chiami? – What's your name?*). The child did not understand the question. An older boy was passing by and told the girl that the educator had asked about her name, to which she replied in Croatian, i.e. *Zovem se E. M.* (Fućak and Vujičić 2013). The boy advised her to respond in Italian, i.e. to say *Io mi chiamo E. M. – My name is E. M.*) and the girl replied in Italian.

The teachers documented the children's interactions with note taking, keeping transcripts of the children's dialogues and monologues, keeping a diary but also by filming (Fućak and Vujičić 2013). Documenting interaction between preschool children in kindergarten gives educators the opportunity to reflect upon the activities they conducted, but also to plan future activities (Fućak and Vujičić 2013).

Another example of documenting activities in a preschool institution was the action research entitled *Stvaranje poticajnoga okruženja u dječjem vrtiću za*

komunikaciju na stranome jeziku (Creating A Stimulating Environment in the Kindergarten for Communication in a Foreign Language), which was conducted in the kindergarten *Potočnica in Zagreb*. The sample included 19 children (10 girls and 9 boys) aged between 3 and 6, while the people who conducted the research were at the same time the teachers in the playgroup. The aim of the research was to establish and subsequently reflect upon, evaluate and alter the conditions which would stimulate communication in English in a playgroup. One of the objectives was to identify the advantages and disadvantages of conducting activities that stimulate communication in English in a mixed-age group. The research was carried out between 2000 and 2001 (Silić 2007b).

The situations monitored included everyday situations children encounter during their stay in kindergarten: greeting upon arrival and departure, introductions while meeting new people, expressing thoughts, placing requests, expressing own needs and opinions while eating, taking part in various games and songs, making propositions, and others (Ibidem). The activities were recorded by filming with a camera, taking personal notes, taking photos and recording on a cassette recorder (Silić 2007).

The results of this research proved that the presence of other children in the playgroup improved the quality of communication in English. The children created activities themselves, while most of these activities were spontaneous. Moreover, what seemed to be the most relevant conclusion of the research was that using a foreign language in everyday, practical and life situations is the best way of perfecting a language (Silić 2007b).

6.5. The Importance of the Role of an Educator in Teaching a Foreign Language

The educator creates an optimal social and pedagogical environment and plans an educational process which will be well-suited to the needs of each child (Petrović-Sočo 2007). It is of utmost importance that the educator plans interesting activities, games and assignments for children, which they are able to select between according to their interests and abilities.

In order to establish a natural environment for learning a foreign language, the educator can apply different strategies such as involving the foreign language in everyday routines and common daily situations such as the child's arrival to the preschool institution, (un)dressing, greeting the educator and peers, conversations during breakfast and lunch, and many more (Silić 2007a).

The educator also needs to be proficient in the language they are teaching and speak it at least at level B2 (Common European Reference of Languages). This is necessary because the educator needs to provide the correct linguistic model and be able to sustain effective communication with the children (Selimović and Karić 2011). According to the European Commission, there are still a dearth of qualified educators for teaching foreign languages to children of an early and preschool age in the European Union, thus the need for training programmes for these professionals in all of the states within the European Union imposes itself (European Commission 2014).

Educators are advised to use L1 in situations in which children might feel language anxiety, such as giving instructions, explaining rules of a game, retelling jokes and similar (Koporčić et al. 2023). It is recommended educators translate everything that is said in L1. As children become more confident in their use of L2, they use it increasingly in various situations (Koporčić et al. 2023).

6.6. Cooperation between Educators and Parents

Parents are important allies when it comes to helping the child learn a foreign language. They know their child the best and spend a considerable portion of time with them (Silić 2007a). Therefore it is important that the child is listened to and that their wishes and needs are respected (Ibidem).

Extended exposure in the child's home is a prerequisite for the efficient acquisition of a foreign language. It is a big bonus if a parent or both parents are proficient in the language the child is learning at the preschool institution. They are the most influential people when it comes to selecting the foreign language the child is going to learn (Moon 2005).

Both parents and educators provide continual exposure to the foreign language and monitor the child's progress. In order for the process of foreign language learning to be successful, good communication between parents and educators is necessary (Koporčić et al. 2023). Parents can be counselled by educators on how to enhance their child's linguistic progress (Gitsaki 2014). Another possibility is to create a questionnaire on the child's language progress, which parents can fill in at home. In that way, valuable information on the child's progress, their linguistic competences (Ellis and Brewster 2014) and other information can be obtained. Moreover, language portfolios with the child's contributions represent another possibility for monitoring the child's progress.

CONCLUSION

The process of institutional foreign language acquisition was long considered to be unspontaneous and artificial. However, the Situational Approach to foreign language acquisition has helped us tackle this issue from a different angle.

The Situational Approach to teaching foreign languages advocates spontaneity in learning foreign languages, freedom of language choice, optimal learning environment, and cooperation between children and all their interlocutors in the process of foreign language learning. In present – day Croatia, there has been an increasing demand for foreign language programmes in preschool institutions. Considerable efforts have been put into creating optimal conditions for learning English and other foreign languages in Croatian preschool institutions. One of the prerequisites for successfully learning a foreign language is effective communication. The efforts focused on developing communication between preschool children and all interlocutors involved in the process of foreign language learning include imitating L1 language acquisition mechanisms while teaching L2, the parallel use of English (or another foreign language) and Croatian, the gradual development of language skills, and freedom of language choice. The young child's continual communication with educators, but also peers, older children and parents is of utmost importance for helping the child with their educational efforts and career choices in the future.

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PRIKAZ PRIMJENE SITUACIJSKOG PRISTUPA U KOMUNIKACIJI NA STRANOM JEZIKU S DJECOM PREDŠKOLSKE DOBI

Sažetak:

Rad proučava problem komunikacije na stranom jeziku u predškolskim ustanovama. Procesi usvajanja materinskog i stranog jezika prolaze kroz slične faze. To olakšava usvajanje stranog jezika u ranoj dobi. Mnoge su prednosti učenja stranih jezika u ranoj dobi, od kojih su najznačajnije plastičnost mozga i fleksibilnost govornog aparata u djece. Situacijski pristup učenju stranog jezika čini učenje stranog jezika ugodnim za djecu i čini da proces učenja stranog jezika u ovoj dobi stremi slobodi jezičnog odabira, optimalnom okruženju za učenje i imitaciji mehanizama za učenje materinskog jezika. Vrlo je važno da odgajatelji tečno govore jezik koji poučavaju, da održavaju ugodnu atmosferu u predškolskoj ustanovi i da promiču suradnju s djecom iz odgojne skupine, kao i roditeljima predškolske djece. Rad donosi prikaz najvažnijih elemenata komunikacije na stranom jeziku s djecom rane dobi. Također ističe važnost kontinuiteta u učenju stranih jezika, i to od predškolske dobi do sveučilišne razine. Ovakav pristup omogućuje djeci rane dobi da u odrasloj dobi postignu visok stupanj tečnosti u jeziku koji uče i da stvore uspješnu karijeru u odabranom području rada.

Key words: jezični odabir; predškolska ustanova; odgajatelj; situacijski pristup

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