



Literatura: Una definición operativa para un contexto de enseñanza del Inglés

Literature: An operational definition For an English teaching context

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RESUMEN

El objetivo de esta investigación es revisar el concepto de literatura con el fin de elaborar una definición operativa para los currícula de enseñanza del inglés (EI) lo suficientemente amplia como para que incluya tanto los textos canónicos como las obras contemporáneas, disidentes y/o de vanguardia que probablemente serían excluidas por los círculos literario-educativos más conservadores. Dada la naturaleza teórica de este trabajo, hemos seguido un enfoque documental con la intención de destacar los elementos más importantes a considerar en la conformación de nuestra propuesta de re-conceptualización. Adicionalmente, sugerimos probables vías de investigación en esta área que podrían ser seguidas en otras investigaciones.

Palabras clave: Literatura, componentes, definición, currículo, ampliación de criterios de selección de textos, enseñanza del inglés.

ABSTRACT

This research aims at revising the concept of literature in order to achieve an operational definition within the English Language Teaching (ELT) curricula which would be ample enough to include both canonical texts, as well as contemporary (dissident and/or avant-garde) works that would probably be excluded by more conservative literary-educational circles. Given its theoretical nature, a documentary approach was followed so as to single out the essential components to consider in the shaping of our proposed re-conceptualization. Additionally, we suggest probable research paths in this area that might be pursued in further research.

Keywords: Literature, components, definition, widening text selection criteria, ELT curricula.



■ INTRODUCCIÓN

Teaching foreign languages implies the learners' understanding of the culture particular to the target language and literature has proved an effective means to fulfill that goal. Yet literature and culture itself are not limited to the intelligentsia's domain as represented in classic literary works. Therefore, in this paper we elaborate on the term "literature" to propose an operational definition (for its use in an ELT context) which is ample enough to consider a wide variety of texts that would probably be excluded by more conservative literary circles, usually more inclined to classic lyricism and universally acclaimed works. Our purpose is, then, inclusive rather than restrictive, meaning that we aim to redefine literature as a flexible and comprehensive concept.

■ METHODOLOGY

Since all crucial concepts for this research are abstract in essence and share relativity as a common feature of human perceptions, we chose a rhetorical and documentary approach as the most suitable to achieve an operational definition of literature that comprises and justifies the inclusion -within ELT curricula- of less canonical literary manifestations besides classical works. Thus, we aim at: (i) analyzing and discussing two important aspects to consider in the shaping of our definition, i.e., the nature of literature and the role of literature in ELT and (ii) outlining and elaborating on the most common elements, features and/ or related terms that most definitions of literature have in common: culture, society, language, creativity, reality and aesthetics. Finally, we establish the most important considerations and recommendations derived from our investigation.

■ ON THE NATURE OF LITERATURE

The first step we should take towards reaching an operative definition of literature is a revision of its nature as it is generally presented in academic contexts. Current notions of the term are rather recent, for it was not until the late 18th and early 19th centuries when this expression was used to refer to imaginative, fictional writing, even if historically speaking literature

had existed ever since the beginnings of civilizations (Culler, 2000). According to Jáimez (2003), some of the connections we make with literary works today derive from those times; i.e., literature is what expresses the inner truth, the intimacy of an author, and by extension, the intimacy and the truth of all human beings. Sartre (1950, pp. 11-13) explains how words, as chosen by authors, come to express this intimate inner truth:

the writer deals with significations... Once and for all he has chosen the poetic attitude which considers words as things and not as signs. For the ambiguity of the sign implies that one can penetrate it at will like a pane of glass and ... consider it as an object ... the poet is on [the] side of [words] ... for the [writer], they are natural things which sprout naturally upon the earth like grass and trees.

Culler (2000), on the other hand, suggests that the actual difficulty in defining literature lies in the apparent failure of literary theory to accurately outline the features that make literary texts different from other discourse types. For example, what we consider typical elements of a poem: rhyme, rhythm and feet, may also be found in advertisements. Narrative, which is usually associated with short stories and novels, is also common in texts of informative nature. Metaphors and symbols are not infrequent in scientific and academic texts. Therefore, stating that what distinguishes literature from other discourses is the presence of those elements does not seem to suffice.

As stated by Wellek and Warren (1949), even the most realistic novel is constructed according to certain artistic conventions. They feature the following constituent elements of the nature of literature: (i) personal expression; (ii) realization and exploitation of the medium; (iii) an apparent lack of purpose and (iv) fictionality. Cárdenas (2000), ascertains that if we accept that literature might be defined as 'poetic art' which, in creating the world expresses itself through language, we could also state that the following are its most important elements: (a) poetry, referred as the exertion of sensitivity and imagination to perceive and acknowledge the world, (b) language, focusing particularly on the symbols and images which feature



literary discourse and (c) cosmogony, which implies the acceptance of the different representations of such a world, and the acceptance of the existence of multiple worlds. Such representations are governed by the uses of language, conceptions, ideologies and values. To this respect, Barrera Linares (2007) reminds us that literary works are not simply the result of an author's ideology, but are articulated with collective ways to perceive and re-create reality.

According to van Dijk (1978), from a pragmatic point of view, we may take literature as some sort of ritual speech act and in doing so we may try to show "...what the social conditions, functions and effects of such acts are in the communicative context of writers, publishers, readers, reviewers, school teachers, etc.". Conversely, for Hernández (1996) a description of the nature of literature shall integrate three key concepts: (a) arts, (b) language as realization and (c) language as a concept.

All of the previous notions lead us to position ourselves on such an abstract and heterogeneous compendium of ideas and attempt to make them coexist within the present research. Since literature is distinctive of human beings, we must make clear that the practical difficulty of defining this term is the result of three features that shape its intrinsic nature. We could say that literature is...

- 1) Opinions rather than Facts
- 2) Processes rather than Information
- 3) Reasoning rather than Recalling

Proportions may constitute a matter of discussion here, but we all accept the presence -in literature- of all of the features listed above. The nature of literature as any recordable human activity involves facts, information and registering, all of which can make it a subject of scientific disciplined study. Nonetheless, what we want to pinpoint is the relevance of opinions, processes and reasoning, marked by a bigger proportion if compared to facts, information and recalling. Without disregard for inspiration and aesthetic enjoyment as inevitable human manifestations that are traditionally linked to literature, our goal is to determine which factors can endow it with the notion of ambiguous abstraction or abstract ambiguity. Even when literature cannot

escape reality (manifested in the form of facts, data and memories) which highly depends on collective conventions, we must admit that aesthetic creation is mostly an individual production. Literary texts contain an author's perception of reality and, consequently, there will always be a tendency towards the subjectivity of opinions and the intimate condition of mental processes, specially exemplified by reasoning regardless of scientific, academic pretensions. Hence, it is difficult to develop golden rules, unquestionable concepts, or abstractions that allow us to safely agree on one single definition of literature without engaging in a nearly endless debate.

THE ROLE OF LITERATURE IN LANGUAGE TEACHING

Although the use of literary works in ELT has been largely challenged throughout the years, its popularity in this context has never declined. Literature has always been an option, even in the second half of the 20th century, amidst skepticism towards using literary texts in language teaching as well as an inclination for more functional approaches in this field (Paran, 2008). Few teachers today would deny the benefits that the use of these texts could bring to the language class. Despite this, there is still a lot of disagreement in terms of the methods, strategies, or purposes that literature in ELT serves (Hi manoğlu, 2005; Paran, 2008). To this respect, Paran (2008) states that the controversy about literature and language teaching prevails because our perceptions in terms of the role of literature in the area of ELT have changed greatly, but rather slowly. This means, as ascertained by this author, that we have gradually moved from seeing literature as part of an elitist study of foreign languages during a great part of the last century, to see it as an authentic source of language in use, by the very end of the 20th century. Consequently, the use of literary texts in ELT today is marked by a vast and complex diversity of approaches.

Following McRae (1991) and Duff and Maley (1991), the role of literature in ELT is, primarily, didactic, and instrumental, aimed at making the learning process, appealing, engaging, and motivational for the student. Carter, (1988) on the other hand, highlighted three common approaches to use literature in language teaching contexts: (a)



Information based, in which accepted interpretations, literary facts and distinctive features of the text are usually taught through the traditional lecture type method; (b) Personal response based approaches, in which the focus of attention is the individual response to texts, usually through a format of tutored discussions, and (c) Language-based approaches with an emphasis on the language as presented in a text. Hirvela (1993), points out that it is through the Language-based approaches that the inclusion of literature in ELT follows a more independent path, since it is oriented to the performance of activities that aim at complementing language learning.

Carter and Long (1992) and Lazar (1993), propose an eclectic approach to the use of literature in ELT. In their view, literary works may serve different purposes, manifested through the teaching of language competences, but also entertainment and personal growth. Conversely, Carter (2007) ascertains that there has been recently an explosion in terms of cultural theory, which has provided stronger bases for the exploration of literature in language teaching. This statement implies that the cultural model has consolidated more successfully and steadily in this area than other approaches.

There is also a relatively recent tendency to consider the benefits of using literature to develop critical thinking in the teaching of a foreign language. Yeasmin, Azad and Ferdoush (2011) concluded that using literary texts not only helps learners enhance their linguistic competences, but also their problem-solving, analytical and interpretative skills. More recently, González (2014) suggested criteria to enhance the critical thinking of EFL teacher trainees through literature as well. Thus, we can see the applications of literature in the area of language teaching are diverse and not all restricted to the teaching of language functions or vocabulary. Furthermore, we consider it important to indicate that such views have been largely associated to a particular conception of literature and language, as well as to specific standpoints concerning language teaching, which determine the selection of texts to be used in class.

LITERATURE: BASIC COMPONENTS

As we approach the objective of the present research, we must foreground the essential components that build up the definition of literature

we put forward. We must consider that this is also an attempt to justify the inclusion of literature in ELT, which will also provide grounds for a comprehensive selection of texts and definition of syllabi in literature courses.

Culture, Language, and Society as the keystones of Literature

Culture is a human concept which we relate to a wide range of items and which is approached from different perspectives in many areas of human activities. For instance, from a sociological perspective culture refers to many facets of life, from the most ordinary, like habits, behaviors, or the use of every-day life tools to the most elevated ones like rituals, ceremonies or artistic manifestations, such as music, painting, and of course, literature (Ember and Ember, 2010). From a linguistic point of view, especially, from the most 'traditional' schools, culture is often considered an autonomous "logical system of representational knowledge, located in the individual mind" which operates independently from language (Hall, 2003, p. 13). From this author's perspective, this system is considered an abstract universal structure which seeks to organize and/or generate knowledge. However, Greenblatt (1995, p. 226), brings forward the relevance of culture for literature by stating: "an awareness of culture as a complex whole can help us to recover that sense by leading us to reconstruct the boundaries upon whose existence the works were predicated."

Thus, through the many definitions we came across, we concluded that culture, as a concept, constitutes a paradox since it can be very concrete or abstract; it includes: human doings and artifacts, actions and thoughts, and knowledge and beliefs, all of which emerge from a continuous process of creation and adaptation. Above all, we define culture as what emerges from the constant necessity of human beings to seek comfort. Nevertheless, we must recognize that 'comfort' is also difficult to define and that it responds to social-historical-cultural factors which may vary from one individual to another.

From this definition we must conclude that culture encloses from the most primitive human-made tools (for instance, a stone knife) to the most elaborate and presently attainable advancements (for example, nuclear energy). The fact that we place



the human search for comfort at the core of culture enables opposite concepts to coexist, which is the case of hedonism and masochism, for instance.

Language constitutes another abstraction and its conceptualization leads to endless arguments. Still, some scholars in the area of linguistics have gathered enough objective information aiming at a more general view of the concept. One of them is McWhorter (2004, p.3) who came up with a comprehensive conceptualization of this term which comes to unify the basic concept and criteria to study the crucial role played by language in the creation of literature: “Language is more than words; it is also how the words are put together—grammar. The ability to use fluent, nuanced language is local to humans: [other animals] can approximate it but not with the complexity or spontaneity that comes naturally to us.” Similarly, McWhorter (op. cit.) states that there are features of language which imply a certain degree of intellectual development and which make a definite difference between language and communication. When illustrating this idea through reports of experiences and/or experimentation with animal species, he highlights the notion that language is particular to humankind.

As stated by Searle (2006), we must acknowledge that what makes language human is the social contract that seems to be made between individuals to use such code to represent their thoughts and to a certain extent, represent the world that surrounds them. To this respect Halliday (1982) ascertained that the existence of language implies the existence of the social person, since the ability to speak and understand others makes sense because there are other individuals like us around. Therefore, language shall be understood as an inter-organic phenomenon. Thus, we assume, for pragmatic reasons, that language is human expression and communication through articulated sounds and/ or their graphic representation.

According to Kroeber and Parsons (1958), the most important issue in defining society consists of outlining such concept separately from culture. The authors also state that there are anthropologists and sociologists who do not even see the relevance of establishing a clear distinction on the ground that “all phenomena of human behavior are sociocultural, with both societal and cultural aspects at the same

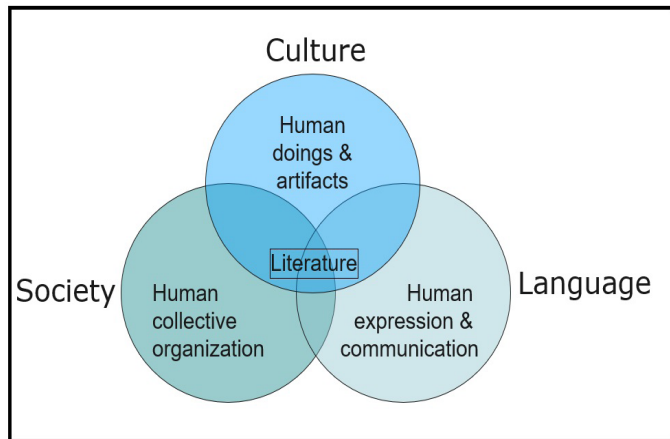
time” (Kroeber and Parson, op. cit., p.1). They also state that even when anthropologists and sociologists acknowledge the difference, they tend to assume a determinative primacy for the set of phenomena in which they are more interested. This means that sociologists tend to see cultural systems as a derivation of social systems, whereas anthropologists tend to be more holistic and start by outlining total systems of culture, and then proceed to incorporate social structure as a constituent part.

In any case, most definitions would coincide that society is any group of people who occupy a particular territory and share a common language understood or not by neighboring peoples (Ember and Ember, 2010). In our view, societies are human forms of organization which derive from people’s necessity to gather in order to achieve survival and collective goals.

Culture may certainly respond to individual necessities, but society should be seen as a cultural consequence of a search for collective comfort that leads to an organization. Society or community as a means for human organization, aims at the achievement of collective goals as well as the preservation of their own culture and status quo. However, each social organization allows for a degree of flexibility, from which social evolution develops. More strict societies will evolve at a different rhythm (orthodox religious communities, for instance), while more flexible systems will undergo huge transformations in what seems to be much less time (like Scandinavian welfare states). And we must add that, within this general view, violence, crime, unrest and discomfort can also play an essential part in this evolution of a culture. For the sake of narrowing down the scope of this research, bringing all the theoretical background together, and illustrate the interaction of these elements in the conceptualization of literature, we provide the following diagram:



Figura 1
Interaction of culture, language and society in the creation of literature



Reality, Creativity and Aesthetics: the basic elements of Literature

In the previous section we established the flexible and dynamic grounds that literature derives from. Nonetheless, it is essential to also review the concepts of reality, creativity and aesthetics, the constituent elements of our proposed definition.

Reality stands for the perception of internal and external, tangible or intangible stimuli. It can be equated to an individual or collective perception having acceptance from the majority. This what makes it relative, as it is not necessarily objective, indubitable, uniform, or unalterable. Reality, changes from one world hemisphere to another and from one era to the next, as well as from one person to another. Moreover, there are degrees of reality generated by popularity and universality. For example, before the Renaissance, for the most widely spread European reality, the Earth was flat. Thus, reality is a concept that is shaped by our consciousness and direct empirical experience, which Berger (1996) characterizes as being capable of moving and being aware of these different spheres of Reality. Therefore, definitions concerning Reality must consider its multiplicity of levels, and that it is marked by subjectivity and instability.

Creativity entails the ability and/or necessity to discover, recreate, or invent new 'items'. It is related to humankind and the development of

culture through time, since it applies to objects, tools, ideas, behavior, approaches, solutions, beliefs and actions, particularly in the shape of inventions, discoveries, variations, versions and recreations. We could speculate that creativeness springs from the paradoxical eagerness of human beings to show uniqueness, which will produce admiration and acceptance by the rest of the people. Then creativity is the result of a combination of a personal gift and the knowledge/experience accumulated by humankind ever since conscientiousness and transcendence became part of everyday life. Creativeness is nurtured upon systematic observation plus a talent, skill, ability, or gift and leads to consequential stages of innovation. Therefore, the highest importance of creativeness derives from the fact that it is greatly responsible for change and technique, evolution, advance and progress. Creativeness always starts in the past, develops in the present and takes us to the future.

Aesthetics could be summarized as the appreciation of items as pleasant, attractive or desirable to the senses or the mind. Aesthetics is not utilitarian: it does not have to fulfil practical requirements. The purpose of aesthetics lies in pleasing the senses, somewhere in between pleasure, joy, "sheer egoism", "aesthetic enthusiasm" and a particular perspective of "good taste", as stated by Orwell (1947).

Likewise, literature responds to aesthetic pleasure and that can assume a personal shape. The Puerto Rican poet Santos-Febres (2016) supported this notion on José Saramago's words about the use of literature:

So the story goes that a reporter once asked the great José Saramago on the purpose of literature. The Nobel award winner replied: "Literature is completely useless". And thanked The Creator, (well, not the creator exactly for he was an atheist, but he must have thanked 'someone') for the existence of something with no practical ends within such a utilitarian world.

Throughout this research we have realized that the central feature that all concepts (culture, language, society, reality, creativity, aesthetics and literature) have in common is human nature. They

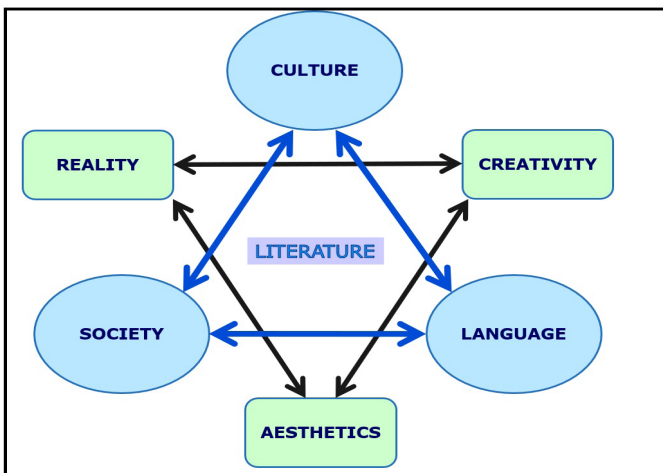
are all particular to humankind and at the same time, they define humanity, the means and the end simultaneously. Culture, society, and language, are everywhere and anywhere a human being has set foot.

Notice that while their essence remains untouched, these concepts are definitively relative in their manifestations and observable realizations; so they cannot be qualified as positive or negative, and neither as definite or immanent. Besides, they are volatile and dynamic both in time and space for they can apply to just an individual, humankind as a whole or any proportion of humanity in between.

As we will see, these features mark a sensible and comprehensive definition of literature to make it different from any other artistic manifestation. These features also characterize literature as a concept with potential to vary, develop and evolve. In diagram 2, we illustrate the interaction of those elements in the conceptualization of literature:

Figura 2

Literature: Interaction of basic components and elements.



LITERATURE: A DEFINITION

The previous review of the nature of literature and its components was meant to provide the framework for the proposal of an operational definition of literature which we express in the following words: literature is the use of language to represent reality creatively and aesthetically.

LITERATURE IS THE USE OF LANGUAGE TO REPRESENT REALITY CREATIVELY AND AESTHETICALLY.

It is important to clarify this definition. Literature is the use of language as produced by human beings in any form, register or manifestation as articulated sounds and/or their graphical representation arranged to convey meaning. That is to say, to represent reality (from the most personal to the most universal/collective) in a creative and aesthetic way (even if it does not fulfill specific standardized conceptions of 'beauty'). This encompasses using language like no one else did before; saying something new with old means (words, expressions, devices), or to say the same things, but in a new way.

Lyric poetry, nonsense rhymes, folk ballads, oral legends, domestic drama, political satire, personal essays or aphorisms might each undergo certain regulations to fulfill the requirements of the specific literary form they exemplify, but they are all literary manifestations. This implies that they derive from the interaction among culture, language and society for aesthetic purposes that is inevitably involved in using language to represent reality with creativity. In other words, literature uses speech and/or written texts to create or recreate a reality while providing new forms. For most scholars and authors literature might be regarded as a particular kind of imitation or reinterpretation of reality. Nevertheless, as stated by Avsenik (2013) "literary types represent different artistic ways of writing about various views of reality in the material world, in society and in life in general, as well as about the truth of even the subtlest shades of the psychological and spiritual state of heroes." It is also stated there that the most important issue for the reader relates to the "multi-layered relation between form and content."

Literary works are usually valued as collective founding documents and recognizable markers of the memory of individuals and entire societies of a culture (Avsenik, 2013). Thus literature is part of "an organic process of intertextual communication within a particular culture and intercultural dialogue", establishing its influence in the cognitive educational process at the level of individuals and society (Avsenik, op. cit.). To this respect Orwell (1947) claims that the Historical Impulse plays a central role among the reasons why authors write. However, we must acknowledge that history is subject to interpretation and manipulation, as portrayed by Orwell himself in 1984 (1949).

Literature is an essential part of our cultural memory since it gathers the experience of past generations and validates it at present as new generations uncover in them the reality of their lives and identify themselves with their message (Orwell, *op. cit.*). Literary texts provide models of interpretation of life experience that become canonical in terms of artistic values as well as ethical values encoded within different societal groups.

Finally, we argue that there is no such difference between reality and literary reality. Whether conscientiously or unintentionally authors write about what they think they know best. Thus literature can become an attempt to openly portray reality, reality in disguise (as in fantasy or science fiction), or an indirect representation of an ideal (as in those meant for educational purposes like analogies, fables and parables).

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

In the field of social sciences, researchers commonly suggest further investigation to apply, test, replicate, validate, and/or question, the results or conclusions presented. In this study, such suggestion is an obvious necessity considering the relativity of all the abstractions involved herein. Moreover, we propose to expand the notions discussed in this work, it would be interesting to review the literature and related concepts at the level of social representations, as perceived by language learners, literature teachers and also literature students. It may also be of interest to analyze perceptions of literature from different fields of knowledge (media, conversation, specialized repertoire, etc.).

Through this study, we aimed at reaching a dynamic, practical, operative definition that could soundly justify the exposure of our subjects –students and teachers– to a more comprehensive, wider and richer selection of texts. In this context, we realized that even though our definition seemed to derive from common sense and pedagogical empirical knowledge, thorough research was essential if we meant to determine solid grounds for our widely inclusive definition. As a result, basic concepts and their inextricable interactions came to the foreground. We can affirm that the subject matter in language courses deals with skills and knowledge, and that L2

learners are exposed to much more than a language. The central goal in language courses is defined by the necessity for an ever-increasing proficiency in the effective use of that language. Since proficiency means conveying messages through language as effectively as possible, the culture and society where the language springs from plays a crucial role in a comprehensive learning of the target language since proficiency means conveying messages through a language. This objective can be enclosed in competences, which range from lexical competence (vocabulary management) to literary competence, understood as the capacity to encode and decode figurative language.

We acknowledged from the beginning of our research that we would have to face the challenge of operationalizing a series of ambiguous general terms, being this the major obstacle in our quest for a disciplined and systematic view of literature. However, once we started exploring the ample theoretical framework around this concept, we realized that we were in the same dilemma that affects all human/social sciences: how to handle relativity. To approach this we decided to accept and recognize that we would never reach a dichotomous solution. Throughout this process, it became clear that all those factors would be expressed in a variety of degrees and intensities, but –most important– that they were real, observable and worthy of study.

Through definitions as the ones we present –including literature as the use of language to represent reality in a creative and aesthetic way– all of our worlds –individual and collective– fit into the Global Village once envisioned by McLuhan (1989). Therefore, by enhancing our students' world view, that Global Village shrinks, making every corner more accessible to those whose intellect is exposed to a wider range of literary texts.

After these considerations we can conclude that our main barrier turned out to be our most crucial strength and stood as the best path leading to a key goal in the teaching of literature: analytic critical thinking. Without this, education in general and the specific use of literature in language education (classes, courses, curricula, etc.) seem to make no sense.

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