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THE ENGLISH PRONUNCIATION OF SENIOR ENGLISH TEACHERS IN PUBLIC SECTOR SCHOOLS OF DISTRICT DIR LOWER: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF MAJOR ERRORS IN THE ARTICULATION OF ENGLISH CONSONANTS AND UNDERLYING FACTORS

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Abstract

This study explores the segmental errors in the pronunciation of English consonants made by senior English teachers in high and higher secondary schools in district Dir Lower, Khybar Pakhtunkhwa Pakistan. The study uses a qualitative approach and both questionnaire and interviews have been used as data collection tools. Error analysis and contrastive analysis provide the theoretical foundations for this study. It was found that the respondents (senior English teachers in public sector schools) made a variety of pronunciation errors in the articulation of English consonants. The major types of errors were: the substitution of one English phoneme with another, either from the English language or the participants' L1, and articulation of a phoneme on the basis of the presence of its corresponding letter in the spelling. The study also shows that these errors can be attributed to L1 transfer, the opaque nature of English orthography and the unfamiliarity of the study participants of the English phonology, etc.

Introduction

For English teachers, the importance of correct pronunciation can hardly be overstated as they serve as role-models to their students (Burri, 2023), and the students' pronunciation largely depends on their teachers' pronunciation. Apart from other factors, successful oral communication depends on correct pronunciation. Since sounds play an important role in communication (especially oral communication), language teachers must, therefore, give due attention to teaching correct pronunciation in their classes, a fact which has hitherto received little attention from many English language teachers in Pakistan.

Pronunciation is just as indispensable and integral part of language learning as are vocabulary, grammar and appropriate use, because incorrect pronunciation may lead to unintelligibility and communication breakdown. Derwing and Munro (2005, 2011, 2015) view it as very crucial for intelligibility and comprehension in oral communication. Wong (1987) has pointed out that if the learners' pronunciation falls below a certain threshold level, they are unable to communicate effectively, despite the fact that their vocabulary and grammar are excellent. While examining the factors affecting listening comprehension, (Varonis and Gass, 1982) have pointed out that native speakers often judge the intelligibility level of non-native speakers on the basis of correct pronunciation. Hence, correct pronunciation is an important ingredient of overall communicative competence.

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Literature Review

Focus on correct pronunciation, especially in EFL contexts, is a recent phenomenon among the language teaching circles. Till the nineteenth century, oral proficiency was not the goal of language teachers, as people had little chances of coming into direct contact with each other and using the target language orally. People learnt the target language largely for the purposes of reading and writing in it. As Richards and Rogers (2001, p. 3) observes: "Changes in language teaching methods throughout history have reflected recognition of changes in the kind of proficiency learners need, such as a move toward oral proficiency rather than reading comprehension as the goal of language study; they have also reflected changes in theories of the nature of language and of language learning."

In terms of the goal of pronunciation, Jenkins (2000, p. 1) argues that "pronunciation instructional efforts should be guided by the needs and roles for communication among NNs (non-native speakers) of various L1s who use English as a lingua franca." Since they have little opportunity of coming into direct contact with the native speakers of English, they do not see native-like mastery nor intelligibility as a goal. She believes that the model to be taught should be neither native-like English nor the intelligible English, but it should be based on how NNSs use English as a lingua franca with other NNSs. The pronunciation goal towards which teachers should work in their EFL classrooms, Jenkins advocates, should be mutual intelligibility between NNSs, rather than between NS-NNS interaction. Taken as a whole, Jenkins' proposal is twofold: First, the model for EFL should be now based on what NNS learners do in interlanguage talk, instead of making NS (native speakers) English as a model; and second, most of the intelligibility problem arise from segments, rather than prosody.

However, most researchers agree that pronunciation is just one link in the chain of the whole communicative competence. As Seidlhofer (1995, p. 12) states, "pronunciation is never an end in itself but a means of negotiating meaning in discourse, embedded in specific sociocultural and interpersonal contexts". Indeed, pronunciation instruction needs to be taught as communicative interaction along with other aspects of spoken discourse, such as pragmatic meaning and nonverbal communication. One empirical study suggests that "there is a threshold level of pronunciation in English such that if a given nonnative speaker's pronunciation falls below this level, no matter how good his or her control of English grammar and vocabulary might be, he or she will not be able to communicate orally with native speakers of English" (Celce- Murcia and Goodwin 1991, p. 136).

Errors in pronunciation can be attributed to various factors, such as age of L2 learning, length of residence in an L2-speaking country, gender, formal instruction, motivation, language learning aptitude, L1 transfer and amount of native language (L1) use, among others.

In Chinese, for example, there are no vowels like /æ/, /u/, etc, and no such consonants as /ð/ and /θ/. Therefore learners have trouble first of all in perceiving these sounds, and consequently try to find nearest equivalents to substitute those new sounds. Therefore, the Chinese learners of English generally substitute /s/ or /z/ for the English /ð/, and /ai/ or /e/ for the English /æ/ (Zhang, 2003, p. 142). Similarly, "In Chinese morphemes are generally made up of a consonant plus a vowel with no consonants cluster and usually ending with a vowel. Negatively transferring this character of Chinese phonological rules to English, learners would commonly pronounce words 'book' and 'bed' as /buk□/ and /bed□/, and have problems in pronouncing words 'prompt' and 'thousandths'" (Ibid).

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Work done on the pronunciation of Arab learners of English also shows that they make certain errors. Al-Shuaibi (2009) investigated the errors committed by Yemeni learners of English and concluded that they had difficulty in producing both English initial and final consonant clusters having three or more consonants. Similarly, Binturki (2008), after investigating the pronunciation errors of five Saudi learners of English, concluded that they had difficulty in producing the voiceless bilabial stop /p/, the voiced labiodental fricative /v/ and the alveolar approximant /r/. He also found that the difficulty was more acute when these consonants occurred in the word final position as compared with the word initial position. Bengali speakers also have certain problems in the pronunciation of English as the Bengali language is deficient in certain phonemes found in the English language. For example, English has labio-dental sounds like /f/ and /v/ whereas Bengali has the bilabial stops / p^h/ and /b^h/. It happens that in pronouncing those two English sounds, "Bengali speakers use both their lips instead of using the upper teeth and the lower lip" (Islam, 2004, p. 24).

It has been observed that English speakers with Urdu and Punjabi as their L1 also make certain errors in the pronunciation of English. Urdu speakers insert a vowel sound (usually schwa) inconsonant clusters at the word-initial position. They pronounce, for example, "school" /sku:l/ as /səku:l/. This has been attributed mainly to the fact that Urdu does not have consonant clusters at the word-initial position. In the same way, they substitute certain English phonemes (especially those which are not found in Urdu) with phonemes from their mother-tongue. For example, they generally substitute the labio-dental fricative /*f*/ with the bilabial / *ƒ*/, the labio-dental fricative /v/ with the bilabial approximant /w/ and the back low vowel /ɔ:/ with another low back vowel /a:/.

This review of the research studies show that learners of English with different L1 backgrounds commit different errors in the pronunciation of English. This variation in the nature of pronunciation errors committed by learners with different L1 backgrounds led some theorists to give more importance to the role played by the learners' mother-tongue in the acquisition of second language phonology.

The phonological systems of different languages vary, some to a greater degree, some slightly. English and Pashto, though descended from the same mother-language (Indo-European), have quite distinct phonological systems too. Similarly, Pashto and English employ two fundamentally different orthographies. The Pashto orthography, despite the fact that it violates one-letter-to-one-phoneme correspondence, is largely shallow or transparent, whereas the English orthographical system is deep or non-transparent, since it allows the same letter to represent two or more sounds, and two or more sounds can be represented by one letter. The Pashto orthographic system has a phonemic basis, i.e. the main function of the Pashto letters of the alphabet is to represent sounds, whereas the English orthography, on the other hand, is largely based on a morphophonemic principle. According to Carney (1994, p. 18): "The English writing system is not simply concerned with mapping phonemes on to letters. To a large extent it tries to offer the reader a constant spelling for a morpheme in spite of the varying pronunciation of the morpheme in different contexts." Studies done by Erdener & Burnham (2005) and Hayes-Harb (2007) suggest that languages with an opaque spelling system (where the sound is not represented in the orthography) are more difficult to acquire. Therefore, English learners with Pashto as their L1 face problems with English pronunciation and hence missing English phonemes in Pashto language and lack of knowledge about English phonology often result in poor pronunciation of senior English teachers.

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The researcher has been teaching Phonetics and Phonology at the University of Malakand for the last 19 years and has observed that most of his students (the majority of whom have Pashto as their mother-tongue and most of them have studied in public sector High and Higher Secondary schools) make more or less identical errors in their English pronunciation. These errors are both segmental (pertaining to individual speech sounds) and suprasegmental (pertaining to stress, length and intonation, etc.) in nature. As a result, these students not only shy away from participating in discussions, giving oral responses, asking questions and doing presentations in seminars, but also face problems in comprehending the content of the lecture. In fact, when the students' attention is drawn to their pronunciation errors, most of them hold their teachers responsible for their incorrect pronunciation, as they believe their teachers to be role-models for them. It is for this reason that the researcher has undertaken the task of identifying the major errors committed by senior English teachers at the segmental level as well as establishing the main factors responsible for these teachers' incorrect pronunciation.

Research Objectives

The study is guided by the following objectives:

1. To identify and describe the errors made in the articulation of English consonant sounds.
2. To explore the causes responsible for the incorrect articulation of the selected segmental sounds.

Research Questions

The study attempts to find answers to the following questions:

1. What segmental errors are made by the school teachers in the articulation of consonant sounds?
2. What are the main sources of the errors in the production of the selected sounds?

Methodology

The study has mainly used a qualitative research approach as it deals with the qualitative description of the segmental errors as well as a qualitative interpretation of the main sources of the errors. The population for the study comprised all the senior English teachers in the government high and higher secondary schools in district Dir Lower. However, for the purpose of the present study, non-random convenience sampling was employed to collect data from the research participants which totalled about 10% of the study population. The data were collected from the research participants using interview as a tool data elicitation. In addition to the questions relating to the participants' demographic information, teaching experience, professional qualification, training etc, the interview contained minimal pairs and a reading passage taken from the English textbook taught at SSC level in government schools in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The participants read out the minimal pairs and the passage which were recorded and later on transcribed for the purpose of analysis.

Theoretical and Analytical Framework

As the study deals with the identification, description and interpretation of segmental errors in pronunciation, the study used Corder's (1967) paradigm of errors analysis as well as the weak version of contrastive analysis. The contrastive analysis hypothesis claimed that transfer can be both positive, resulting from resemblance between languages, and negative (or language interference), caused by difference between languages. However, it does not predict errors unlike the strong version of contrastive analysis. Instead, it focuses on the actual errors produced and accounts for them in terms of L1.

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Thus, the theoretical framework used in the study is an integration of error analysis and the weak version of contrastive analysis as the study deals with identifying, describing, and interpreting segmental errors in terms of L1 influence.

Data Analysis and Discussion

In this section, first errors in the articulation of the English voiceless plosives are presented and analyzed. They are followed by the presentation and analysis of the nasals, laterals, fricatives and approximants, respectively.

Errors in the Articulation of the Voiceless Plosive Consonants

In this section, errors in the articulation of the English voiceless plosives are presented and analyzed. They are given in table 4.5, followed by a detailed analysis.

As table 4.5 below shows, all the subjects made a variety of errors in the articulation of the English voiceless plosives /p, t and k/. To begin with, they did not aspirate any of these voiceless plosive at all, although these sounds are sometimes fully aspirated, at times partially aspirated and sometimes unaspirated, depending on the context. For example, these consonants are fully aspirated when they are followed by a stressed vowel, e.g. appeal, pardon, taken, talkative, come and keep. They are partially aspirated when preceded by another consonant in the same syllable, e.g. spit, stood and sky, or when they are followed by a very short vowel, e.g. pick and tick, or when an unstressed vowel comes after them, e.g. upper, utter and baker (Roach 2020). These consonants are totally unaspirated when they occur in the word-final position, e.g. lap, talk and bat.

Table 1

The English Phoneme	Symbol	Errors
The voiceless bilabial plosive	/p/	No aspiration No nasal plosion No lateral plosion
The voiceless alveolar plosive	/t/	No aspiration No nasal plosion No lateral plosion Substitution with /d/ in the past and past participle forms of regular verbs Unexploded /t/ before /d3, d, d/ etc.
The voiceless velar plosive	/k/	No aspiration No nasal plosion No lateral plosion

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The subjects' inability to aspirate these consonants when required is due to L1 negative transfer, as the Yusufzai variety of Pashto (the variety use by the participants) hardly have any aspiration. These voiceless plosives also constitute a part of the inventory of Pashto sounds (with slight variation in the place and manner of articulation), but there they do not have this feature of aspiration.

The subjects did not articulate the English voiceless plosives with nasal plosion when they were followed by the nasal consonants /m/ or /n/. The native speakers articulate them with nasal plosion when they are followed by a nasal consonant, e.g. topmost, hypnotize, mutton, acme and Faulkner. Similarly, the subjects also failed to articulate the voiceless plosive sounds with lateral plosion when needed. When any of these sounds is followed by the lateral consonant /l/, e.g. ripple, little, pickle, they are articulated with lateral plosion by the native speakers. The subjects inserted a vowel, usually the schwa, between the preceding voiceless plosive and the following lateral consonant, especially when they occurred at the word-final position.

Another error which the subjects made in the articulation of the voiceless plosive /t/ was the substitution of the sound with the voiced alveolar plosive /d/. They articulated the final "-ed" or "–d" in all the past and past participle forms of regular verbs with /d/. When "-d" or "-ed" is added to verbs ending in voiceless consonants (other than /t/) to produce the past or past participle form of the verbs, this final "-d" or "-ed" is articulated as /t/ and not as /d/. Thus the verbs "passed", "pushed" and "picked" are pronounced as / pa:st/, /pʊʃt/ and /pikt/. The subjects pronounced these verbs as / pa:sd/, /pʊʃd/ and /pikd/.

This error can also be attributed to L1 transfer as the Pashto orthographic system is largely transparent and there is generally one-to-one correspondence between the sounds and the letters of the alphabet. It is for this reason that the subjects pronounced the ending of all the regular verbs with /d/.

Errors in the Articulation of the Voiced Plosive Consonants

Errors in the articulation of the English voiced plosives are given in table 4.6. A detailed analysis of these errors is given below the table.

Table 2

The English Phoneme	Symbol	Errors
The voiced bilabial plosive	/b/	No nasal and lateral plosion No partial and reduced voicing
The voiced alveolar plosive	/d/	No nasal and lateral plosion No partial and reduced voicing
The voiced velar plosive	/g/	No nasal and lateral plosion No partial and reduced voicing

As may be noted in the above table, the first type of error which the subjects made in the articulation of the voiced plosive consonants is related to the feature of voicing. When these

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consonants occur in the word-initial position, they are partially voiced, e.g. “bet”, “dead” and “gum”. The feature of voicing reduces considerably (with some native speakers almost imperceptible), however, when they occur finally, e.g. “rub”, “bad” and “big”. They are fully voiced when they occur at intervocalic position, e.g. “abate”, “reduce” and “again”. The above rule applies to all the voiced consonants. The subjects articulated the fully voiced plosive in all the three positions. The subjects also did not articulate the laterally and nasally exploded varieties of these consonants. Like the voiceless plosives, the voiced plosives also nasally or laterally explode when they are followed by nasal /m, n/ or lateral consonant /l/, e.g. “submit”, “abnormal”,” admire”, “sudden”, “dogmatic”, “vagueness”, “middle”, “ladle”, “legal” and “mingle”.

Thus, the study supports the findings of the previous research studies (e.g. Muhammad, 2023; Nurhayati, 2020) on the erroneous production of English sounds which claim that the non-native learners of English produce plosive sounds either without any aspiration or with reduced aspiration due to different L1 phonetic systems. Abbasi et al. (2025) claims that Pakistani L2 speakers’ VOT systematically varies from that American English speakers and that reduced aspiration is a stable feature of not just Pakistan ESL speakers but of some of the South Asian spoken varieties in general.

Errors in the Articulation of the English Nasal Consonants

The subjects did not make any errors in the articulation of the bilabial nasal consonant

Table 3

The English Phoneme	Symbol	Errors
The voiced velar nasal consonant	/ŋ/	Substitution with /ng/

/m/ and the alveolar nasal consonant /n/, as these sounds already exist in their mother-tongue. However, they substituted the English velar nasal consonant, generally referred to as angma, /ŋ/ with “-ng”. The reason for this substitution is that in Pushto the velar nasal consonant does not exist, whereas both /n/ and /g/ are found in the phonemic inventory of Pashto sounds. Thus they pronounced “hang” as /hæng/, “sing” as/sing/ and “bang” as /bæng/. This finding is supported by Muhamood, Irfan, Alfares, and Yasmeen (2023) in their study of the English velar nasal sound produced by undergraduate students in Pakistani universities.

Errors in the Articulation of the English Lateral Consonant

As table 4.8 shows, the subjects committed certain errors in the articulation of the English lateral consonant /l/. To begin with, they articulated /l/ in words in which it was supposed to be silent. For example, they pronounced “calf” as /k:lp/, “folk” as /polk/, and “half” as /ha:lp/. It may be noted that they generally substituted the voiceless labio-dental fricative /*f*/ with the unaspirated variety of the voiceless bilabial plosive /p/ as well.

Table 4

The English Phoneme	Symbol	Errors
The voiced lateral consonant	/l/	Pronouncing /l/ in certain post-vocalic position where it is silent Not articulating the dark variety of /l/

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		Not articulating the syllabic /l/ in consonant clusters when /l/ occurs finally

The other error which the subjects made in the articulation of the lateral consonant was the articulation of the clear variety of this phoneme in all positions. They did not pronounce the dark variety of the lateral consonant when required. It may be noted that the dark variety is typically found in English (RP and similar accents) when /l/ occurs before a consonant, e.g. “build” “melt” and “self”, etc. or in the syllable’s final position, e.g. “full”, “kill” and “sell”, etc.

When the lateral consonant occurred in the syllable’s final position and was preceded by a consonant, e.g. “double”, “middle” and “little”, instead of pronouncing a syllabic /l/, the subjects made the error of inserting a vowel between this and the preceding consonant. This finding is consistent with Popescu and Biondi (2024) study of the English /l/ allophony produced by French learners of English. The learners produced clear non-velarized /l/ whereas the English normally produce dark /l/.

Errors in the Articulation of the Labio-dental Fricatives /*f*/ and /v/

As table 4.9 below shows, the subjects substituted the voiceless labio-dental fricative /*f*/ with the unaspirated variety of the voiceless bilabial plosive consonant /p/. Thus they pronounced “feel” as /pi:l/, “full” as /pul/ and “fulfil” as /pulpil/, etc.

They also committed a error in the articulation of the voiced labio-dental fricative consonant /v/ by substituting it with the bilabial approximant /w/. Thus they pronounced “very” as /weri/, “have” as /hæw/ and “save” as /sæw/, etc. this finding is supported by other research studies produced in the Pakistani context of speakers of languages other than Pashto (e.g. Syed, 2020; Iqbal, 2021). Other studies on labio-dental fricatives have shown that the non-native speakers of English produced the two sounds with the same voice (Fahmei & Tarmizi, 2020).

Table 5

The English Phoneme	**Symbol**	**Errors**
The voiceless labio-dental fricative	/*f*/	Substitution with the unaspirated /p/
The voiced labio-dental fricative	/v/	Substitution with /w/

Errors in the Articulation of Interdental Fricatives /θ/ and /ð/

Table 6

The English Phoneme	**Symbol**	**Errors**
The voiceless Interdental fricative	/θ/	Substitution with the Pashto alveolar voiceless plosive / /
The voiced interdental fricative	/ð/	Substitution with the Pashto voiced alveolar plosive / /

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In the articulation of the voiceless interdental fricative /θ/, the subjects made the error of substituting it with the Pashto voiceless alveolar plosive ( ). Similarly, they also substituted the voiced interdental fricative with the Pashto alveolar plosive ( ). Here again the phenomenon of L1 transfer is obvious. This finding is also reported in studies such as Syed, Ansari, and Bux (2017) and Mahmood (2011).

Errors in the Articulation of the Voiced Palato-alveolar Fricative /ʒ/ and the Voiceless Glottal Sound /h/

Table 7

The English Phoneme	Symbol	Errors
The voiced palato-alveolar fricative	/ʒ/	Substitution with either /j/ or /d3/
The voiceless glottal fricative	/h/	Pronouncing /h/ in words in which it is silent

As the above table shows, the subjects substituted the voiced palato-alveolar fricative consonant /ʒ/ with either the approximant /j/or with the voiced alveolar affricate /dʒ/. Thus they pronounced the word "measure" either as /mejər/ or as medʒdʒr/, and "pleasure" either as /plejər/ or as /pldʒər/. This finding is supported by Dogar's (2019) of Pakistani speakers who articulate the sound without frication. The glottal fricative /h/ is supposed to be silent in words "hour", "heir", "honour", "honest" and their derivatives. The subjects made the error of pronouncing the initial /h/ in these words. Previous studies on the glottal sound report that the leaners either drop or weaken the sound (e.g. Kager & Exare, 2024) or they hypercorrect it in vowel-initial words (e.g. Exare, 2020).

Errors in the Articulation of the Voiced Post-alveolar Frictionless Continuant /r/

Table 8

The English Phoneme	Symbol	Errors
The voiced post-alveolar frictionless continuant	/r/	Articulation of /r/ whenever available in spelling Articulation of the trilled /r/

In the RP variety of English, the frictionless continuant /r/ is pronounced when it is either in the pre-vocalic or intervocalic position. It is generally not articulated when it is in post-vocalic position, followed by another consonant. The subjects made the error of articulating /r/ whenever they saw it in the spelling. Thus they pronounced the words "her" as /hər/, "burn" as bərn/ and "turn" as /tərn/.

In RP, generally the flapped /r/ (articulated with a single tap of the tongue-tip against the roof of the mouth) is used, but the subjects seemed to prefer the trilled variety of /r/ (articulated with more than one taps).

Errors in the Articulation of the Approximants /j/ and /w/

While articulating the voiced bilabial approximant /w/, the subjects did not round their lips sufficiently. Similarly, the subjects omitted the voiced palatal approximant /j/ from

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Table 9

The English Phoneme	Symbol	Errors
The voiced bilabial approximant	/w/	Lack of lip-rounding
The voiced palatal approximant	/j/	No articulation of this sound in words in which it is followed by the long back high vowel /U:/

words in which it was followed by the long high back vowel /U:/. Thus they pronounced the words "absolute" as /ebsəlu:t/ and "June" as /dʒu:n/. In words in which the voiced palatal approximant /j/ was preceded by another consonant and followed by the long back high vowel /u:/, the subjects made the error of omitting the sounds /j/ and /u:/ and replacing them with the long front high vowel /I:/ and the voiced bilabial approximant /w/. Thus they pronounced the words "new" as /nI:w/, "few" as /*f*I:w/ and "due" as /dI:w/.

Conclusion

It was found that the respondents (senior English teachers in public sector schools) made a variety of pronunciation errors in the articulation of the English diphthongs. These errors can be categorized into the following major types:

1. The substitution of one English phoneme with another English phoneme;
2. The substitution of an English phoneme with a phoneme from the mother-tongue; and
3. The articulation of a phoneme on the basis of the presence of its corresponding letter in the spelling.

On the basis of the analysis of the collected data, the following factors were identified to be responsible for these errors:

1. L1 transfer;
2. The exclusion of any practical course on English phonetics and phonology from both the academic and professional syllabi.
3. Lack of knowledge about English phonology.
4. The opaque nature of the English orthography; and
5. The participants' lack of exposure to native speakers input.

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