

Students' Speaking Anxiety and Its Effect on Oral Performance in Junior High School

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Abstract

Speaking anxiety refers to the fear and nervousness students experience when asked to speak in a foreign language, particularly in front of others. This research aims to analyze how speaking anxiety is reflected in seventh-grade students' speaking performance and to identify the contributing factors. A qualitative case study was conducted involving 15 students from SMP Negeri 7 Pekalongan, selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected using an observation checklist (Horwitz et al., 1986) and an open-ended questionnaire (FLCAS). The findings revealed that all students experienced all three types of speaking anxiety, with test anxiety being the most dominant type, followed by communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and co-dominance of communication apprehension and test anxiety. All students exhibited observable behavioral manifestations such as prolonged silence, stuttering, trembling hands, tense facial expressions, and avoidance of eye contact. The main factors causing anxiety were internal psychological factors, peer pressure, environmental distractions, low self-confidence, and teacher pressure. Speaking anxiety is visibly reflected through students' verbal and non-verbal behaviors. Teachers should recognize these signs and create supportive classroom environments.

Keywords: Speaking Anxiety, Communication Apprehension, Test Anxiety, Fear of Negative Evaluation; EFL Learners, Junior High School

INTRODUCTION

Language anxiety often emerges when Indonesian junior high school students are asked to speak English in front of their classmates. Many of them feel nervous, struggle to find the right words, or even fall completely silent during speaking activities. This is not surprising because speaking requires quick thinking, the ability to produce language without prior preparation, and awareness of the social situation, factors that collectively generate considerable stress for language learners (Thornbury, 2005). As a result, many students encounter psychological obstacles when required to speak in English. Horwitz et al. (1986) define foreign language anxiety as a specific set of learner characteristics that includes their self-perception, personal beliefs about studying a new language, emotional responses during learning activities, and observable behaviors. What makes this type of anxiety distinct is that it stems directly from the process of learning a foreign language itself. This type of anxiety is especially noticeable during speaking tasks, where students must produce language under time pressure while being observed by both teachers and peers. Pekrun (2024) further explains that anxiety arises when learners feel they lack control over their performance outcomes, even when they strongly wish to succeed. In Indonesian EFL classrooms, observable signs such as extended silence, code-switching, and physical tension are frequently reported (Djahimo et al., 2018; Hasibuan & Irzawati, 2020)

Speaking anxiety is not a uniform experience but consists of several interrelated components. Horwitz et al. (1986) identify three primary types: communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety. McCroskey (1977) originally coined the term

communication apprehension to capture the discomfort individuals feel in oral communication situations. Learners who suffer from this anxiety tend to withdraw from speaking opportunities. Observable signs include extended periods of silence, barely audible speech, and frequent verbal hesitation before producing words (Akkakoson & Mongkut, 2016). Fear of negative evaluation involves students' worries about being criticized or negatively judged by others, which typically surfaces in non-verbal signals like gaze avoidance, restlessness, and stiff body posture (Djahimo et al., 2018; Jaya et al., 2022). When students face evaluation situations, they may experience test anxiety, which manifests through various physical symptoms. These include shaking hands or legs, sudden inability to recall previously learned material, and visible tension shown through facial expressions (von der Embse et al., 2021).

Together, these three dimensions represent the main psychological conditions shaping students' emotional preparedness to engage in EFL speaking activities. Although prior research has extensively examined speaking anxiety, a notable gap remains. Most existing studies have treated speaking performance as an outcome to be measured focusing on pronunciation, grammar, and fluency rather than as a dynamic behavioral process through which anxiety is visibly expressed. Azahri (2020) conducted a quantitative study with eighth-grade junior high school students and reported that 80% experienced speaking anxiety, with test anxiety being the most dominant type. However, that research did not explore how anxiety actually manifests during real-time speaking. Daymiel et al. (2022) found a significant correlation between language anxiety and speaking performance among university students, but their analysis relied on statistical relationships rather than behavioral observations. Astuti (2021) identified internal triggers such as fear, worry, and low self-confidence as contributors to speaking anxiety, yet the findings were predominantly based on self-reported data. Badriyah & Novita (2023) adopted a qualitative case study design; nevertheless, they focused on categorizing anxiety types and origins without analyzing real-time behavioral reflections. Similarly, Santoso & Perrodin (2021) pointed to grammatical accuracy and limited vocabulary as key factors, but they did not investigate how these factors translate into observable behaviors during speaking tasks.

The methodological constraints of earlier studies are especially relevant in light of recent critiques. Crosby (2025) argues that depending solely on self-report tools like the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) may produce biased results due to students' inaccurate self-perceptions, and therefore recommends incorporating direct behavioral observation to capture the real-time dynamics of anxiety. Sutarsyah (2017), while providing solid quantitative evidence of anxiety's negative effect on speaking performance, acknowledged that his research lacked depth and called for more qualitative research. Christy et al., (2021) combined questionnaires with interviews, but their emphasis remained on measuring anxiety levels rather than observing its real-time manifestations. Consequently, there is a clear scarcity of qualitative studies that examine how the three types of speaking anxiety are concretely reflected in students' observable verbal and non-verbal behaviors such as extended silence, hesitation, fidgeting, and gaze avoidance during authentic classroom speaking activities.

This gap becomes even more critical when considered from the perspective of early adolescent learners at the junior high school level. Seventh-grade students are in a transitional period marked by increased self-awareness and heightened sensitivity to peer evaluation (Santrock, 2011). Drawing on the researcher's direct teaching internship experience at SMP Negeri 7 Pekalongan, strong evidence of speaking anxiety was consistently observed among Grade VII students. Many students showed reluctance to volunteer, frequently reverted to Bahasa Indonesia when expected to speak English, produced very brief responses, hesitated

excessively, avoided eye contact, or remained completely silent when asked to perform orally. These observable behaviors correspond closely to what Horwitz et al. (1986) describe as manifestations of communication apprehension and fear of negative evaluation. Nevertheless, these patterns had not yet been systematically investigated through academic research in this specific local setting, highlighting the need for empirical validation and structured qualitative inquiry. Identifying the factors that trigger speaking anxiety is equally important. Young (1991) outlines six potential sources: personal and interpersonal anxieties, learners' beliefs about language learning, teachers' beliefs about language instruction, teacher-learner interactions, classroom procedures, and language testing. These factors often appear in the form of low self-confidence, fear of making errors, and limited speaking practice. Hanifa (2018) found that in the Indonesian context, the fear of appearing incompetent in front of peers serves as a significant psychological trigger. Ashari et al. (2023) demonstrated that competitive classroom environments and excessive error correction from teachers intensify students' fear of participation. Furthermore, Amiruddin (2022) emphasized that limited exposure to English outside the classroom prevents students from building the confidence required for spontaneous speech. These internal and external factors function as primary catalysts that heighten the specific types of anxiety students experience during speaking performance.

The theoretical foundation of this research integrates multiple key concepts. Horwitz et al. (1986) model of foreign language anxiety provides the basis for identifying the three types of speaking anxiety. Young (1991) framework helps explain the internal and external factors contributing to anxiety. Akkakoson & Mongkut (2016); Djahimo et al. (2018) offer operational definitions for observing behavioral indicators of anxiety. In addition, Cognitive Interference Theory suggests that anxiety consumes working memory resources needed for vocabulary retrieval and sentence construction, leading to mental overload that disrupts smooth communication (Akkakoson & Mongkut, 2016). This explains why observable behaviors such as prolonged pauses and hesitation occur they are outward reflections of learners' internal cognitive struggles. In this research, speaking performance is not treated as a measurable academic score but rather as a behavioral medium through which anxiety becomes visible via verbal and non-verbal indicators (Brown, 2004; Harmer, 2001).

Based on the gaps identified above, this research seeks to analyze how speaking anxiety is reflected in the actual speaking performance of seventh-grade students at SMP Negeri 7 Pekalongan. Specifically, the objectives are: (1) to describe how the types of speaking anxiety experienced by students are reflected in their actual speaking performance, with particular attention to observable behaviors such as prolonged silence, stuttering, fidgeting, and gaze avoidance; and (2) to identify the factors that contribute to students' speaking anxiety during classroom speaking activities. This article makes three significant contributions to knowledge. Theoretically, it enriches the existing literature on foreign language anxiety by offering a detailed qualitative perspective on how anxiety types are manifested through observable verbal and non-verbal behaviors during real-time speaking performance, in contrast to studies that merely measure anxiety levels. Methodologically, it directly responds to Crosby (2025) recommendations by capturing anxiety in real time through direct observation, thereby providing a richer depiction of foreign language classroom anxiety than self-report instruments alone can offer. Practically, the findings offer practical guidance for teachers to recognize visible signs of speaking anxiety in students' performance, enabling them to foster more supportive learning environments and implement strategies to reduce nervousness. For the Indonesian EFL context, this research provides locally relevant insights into how speaking anxiety manifests among early adolescents in the transitional junior high school phase, thereby extending and complementing the findings of earlier research.

METHOD

This reaserch utilized a qualitative case study approach (Creswell, 2014) to examine students' speaking anxiety as manifested in their oral performance. Conducted at SMP Negeri 7 Pekalongan during the second semester of the 2025/2026 academic year, the research involved 15 seventh-grade students selected via purposive sampling (Patton, 2015) , based on teachers' recommendations for those exhibiting clear signs of speaking anxiety. Data collection relied on two instruments: an observation checklist and an open-ended questionnaire. The observation checklist, adapted from Horwitz et al. (1986) foreign language anxiety framework which classified anxiety into communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation, used behavioral indicators drawn from Akkakoson & Mongkut (2016) and Djahimo et al. (2018). The open-ended questionnaire, derived from the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), was administered to the same 15 students to identify the underlying causes of their speaking anxiety.

The researchers followed the three-stage interactive analysis framework proposed by Miles et al. (2014). The first stage involved reducing and organizing the raw data. The second stage required presenting the organized information in a structured format. The final stage focused on interpreting the findings and confirming their validity. During condensation, questionnaire responses and observation notes were summarized. In the display phase, findings were structured into coding matrices and triangulation tables to explore links between physical symptoms and psychological triggers. Data credibility was enhanced through triangulation by cross-verifying observation results against individual questionnaire responses for each student.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

This reaserch analyzed data on students' speaking anxiety as reflected in their speaking performance. The data were obtained through two main instruments: observation checklists and open-ended questionnaires. The research involved 15 seventh-grade students of SMP Negeri 7 Pekalongan who were selected purposively based on teacher recommendations. The results are presented in two main sections: (1) the types of speaking anxiety experienced by students, and (2) the factors causing speaking anxiety.

Types of Speaking Anxiety

The observation checklist used in this research was adapted from the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) by Horwitz et al. (1986) to identify three types of speaking anxiety. The first type is Communication Apprehension (CA), which refers to the fear or anxiety individuals feel when communicating orally. Behaviorally, students with CA tend to remain silent for extended periods, stutter or repeat words frequently, use excessive fillers such as "uhm" or "eee", and speak in a very low volume (Akkakoson & Mongkut, 2016). The second type is Test Anxiety (TA), which is the fear of being evaluated or tested. Its behavioral manifestations include trembling hands or legs, standing too rigidly with stiff posture, and showing tense or pale facial expressions (von der Embse et al., 2021). The third type is Fear of Negative Evaluation (FNE), which is the worry about being judged negatively by others. Students experiencing FNE typically avoid eye contact, fidget with their clothes, hair, or pen, and may laugh nervously or look at peers for help (Djahimo et al., 2018; Jaya et al., 2022).

The following table presents the types of speaking anxiety experienced by each student based on classroom observation.

Table 1. Types of Speaking Anxiety Experienced by Students

No	Students Code	CA	TA	FNE	Types Experience	Dominant Type
1.	S-1	3/4	3/3	2/3	CA, TA, FNE	TA
2.	S-2	2/4	3/3	1/3	CA, TA, FNE	TA
3.	S-3	4/4	3/3	1/3	CA, TA, FNE	CA & TA
4	S-4	3/4	2/3	3/3	CA, TA, FNE	FNE
5.	S-5	3/4	3/3	2/3	CA, TA, FNE	TA
6	S-6	3/4	2/3	2/3	CA, TA, FNE	FNE
7.	S-7	3/4	2/3	3/3	CA, TA, FNE	CA
8.	S-8	3/4	3/3	2/3	CA, TA, FNE	TA
9.	S-9	4/4	2/3	2/3	CA, TA, FNE	CA
10.	S-10	3/4	3/3	2/3	CA, TA, FNE	TA
11	S-11	3/4	2/3	2/3	CA, TA, FNE	CA
12	S-12	4/4	3/3	2/3	CA, TA, FNE	CA & TA
13	S-13	3/4	2/3	2/3	CA, TA, FNE	CA
14	S-14	3/4	3/3	2/3	CA, TA, FNE	TA
15	S-15	4/4	2/3	1/3	CA, TA, FNE	CA

The results in Table 1 show that all 15 students (100%) experienced all three types of speaking anxiety: Communication Apprehension, Test Anxiety, and Fear of Negative Evaluation. However, the dominant type varied among students.

Table 2. Distribution of Dominant Anxiety Types

Dominant Type	Number of Students	Percentage
Test Anxiety (TA)	6 students (S-1, S-2, S-5, S-8, S-10, S-14)	40%
Communication Apprehension (CA)	5 students (S-7, S-9, S-11, S-13, S-15)	33.3%
Fear of Negative Evaluation (FNE)	2 students (S-4, S-6)	13.3%
CA + TA (co-dominant)	2 students (S-3, S-12)	13.3%

As presented in Table 2, Test Anxiety was the most dominant type, experienced by 6 out of 15 students (40%). Communication Apprehension was dominant in 5 students (33.3%), Fear of Negative Evaluation in 2 students (13.3%), and two students (13.3%) showed co-dominance of Communication Apprehension and Test Anxiety.

Behavioral Manifestations of Anxiety

During the observation, students displayed various behavioral indicators of anxiety. The following table summarizes the most frequently observed behaviors.

Table 3. Frequency of Behavioral Indicators

Type	Behavioral Indicator	Number of Students	Percentage
CA	Remaining silent for more than 3 seconds	15/15	100%

	Stuttering or repeating words frequently	15/15	100%
	Using excessive fillers ("uhm", "eee")	12/15	80%
	Speaking in a very low volume	11/15	73.3%
TA	Hands or legs visibly trembling	15/15	100%
	Standing too rigidly (stiff posture)	10/15	66.7%
	Showing a tense or pale facial expression	15/15	100%
FNE	Avoiding eye contact	15/15	100%
	Fidgeting (playing with clothes/hair/pen)	12/15	80%
	Laughing nervously or looking at peers for help	4/15	26.7%

Table 3 reveals that silence, stuttering, trembling hands, tense facial expression, and avoiding eye contact were exhibited by all 15 students (100%). These findings indicate that physical symptoms and avoidance behaviors are the most common manifestations of speaking anxiety among seventh-grade students.

Factors Causing Speaking Anxiety

The open-ended questionnaire, adapted from the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) by Horwitz et al. (1986), was administered to explore the factors causing speaking anxiety. The following themes emerged from the qualitative analysis of student responses.

Table 4. Factors Causing Speaking Anxiety

Factor Category	Theme	Number of Students	Percentage	Example Student Quote
Internal Factors	Psychological (nervousness, shame, fear of mistakes)	15/15	100%	"I feel shy and nervous when speaking English." (S-10, Q1)
	Linguistic difficulties (lack of vocabulary, complex words)	9/15	60%	"I find it difficult when the words or pronunciation are too complicated" (S-4, Q2)
	Low self-confidence	13/15	86.7%	"I feel that I am not able to speak English well." (S-2, Q5)
External Factors	Teacher pressure (fear of scolding, bad grade, teacher's gaze)	12/15	80%	"I am afraid that the teacher will scold me if I make mistakes." (S-9, Q4)
	Peer pressure (fear of being laughed at, shame, peers' gaze)	13/15	86.7%	"I am afraid that my classmates will laugh at me." (S-5, Q1)
	Environmental distractions (noisy classroom)	13/15	86.7%	"A noisy classroom makes it difficult for me to concentrate." (S-3, Q2)
	Situational factors (sudden performance demand)	5/15	33.3%	"I feel nervous when I have to speak suddenly in front of the class." (S-6, Q10)

Based on Table 4, psychological factors (nervousness, shame, fear of making mistakes) were reported by all 15 students (100%). Peer pressure, environmental distractions, and low self-confidence were reported by 13 students (86.7%), while teacher pressure was reported by 12 students (80%). These findings indicate that both internal and external factors contribute to students' speaking anxiety.

Triangulation of Findings

The following table integrates the observation results (types of anxiety) with questionnaire results (causing factors) for each student.

Table 5. Triangulation of Types and Factors of Speaking Anxiety

Student	Dominant Anxiety Type	Main Causing Factors
S-1	Test Anxiety	Teacher pressure + Peer pressure
S-2	Test Anxiety	Psychological + Peer pressure
S-3	CA + TA (co-dominant)	Psychological + Linguistic + Environmental
S-4	Fear of Negative Evaluation	Psychological + Teacher + Linguistic
S-5	Test Anxiety	Psychological + Peer + Teacher
S-6	Fear of Negative Evaluation	Psychological + Situational + Peer
S-7	Communication Apprehension	Psychological + Teacher + Linguistic
S-8	Test Anxiety	Teacher + Psychological + Linguistic
S-9	Communication Apprehension	Teacher + Peer + Psychological
S-10	Test Anxiety	Psychological + Peer + Teacher
S-11	Communication Apprehension	Psychological + Environmental + Teacher
S-12	CA + TA (co-dominant)	Peer + Teacher + Psychological
S-13	Communication Apprehension	Peer + Psychological + Teacher
S-14	Test Anxiety	Psychological + Linguistic + Teacher
S-15	Communication Apprehension	Psychological + Peer + Environmental

The triangulation in Table 5 reveals that psychological factors (nervousness, shame, fear of mistakes) were consistently present across all students regardless of their dominant anxiety type. Students with Test Anxiety as the dominant type were primarily driven by teacher pressure and peer pressure. Students with Fear of Negative Evaluation were mainly influenced by peer pressure and psychological factors. Students with Communication Apprehension were largely affected by psychological and linguistic factors, as well as environmental distractions.

Discussion

The results of this research show that all fifteen seventh-grade students experienced speaking anxiety, with Test Anxiety emerging as the most dominant type, affecting 40% of the students. Fear of Negative Evaluation was dominant in 13.3% of students, while Communication Apprehension was dominant in 33.3% of students. Two students (13.3%) showed co-dominance of Communication Apprehension and Test Anxiety. In terms of behavioral manifestations, 100% of students exhibited prolonged silence, stuttering, trembling hands, tense facial expressions, and avoidance of eye contact during their speaking performances. These findings confirm that speaking anxiety is not a singular construct but a multidimensional experience that becomes visibly reflected through students' verbal and non-verbal behaviors in authentic classroom settings. The dominance of Test Anxiety suggests that seventh-grade students at SMP Negeri 7 Pekalongan are particularly sensitive to evaluative situations. This may be because they are in a transitional phase of adolescence where external validation from teachers and peers becomes highly significant (Santrock, 2011). The physical symptoms observed, such as trembling hands and tense facial expressions, indicate that anxiety is not merely a psychological state but also a physiological response that can hinder students' ability to perform well during speaking tasks.

In addition to the observed behaviors, students also reported various internal and external factors contributing to their anxiety. According to the questionnaire, 100% of students experienced psychological factors such as nervousness, shame, and fear of making mistakes. Peer pressure, environmental distractions, and low self-confidence were reported by 86.7% of students each, while teacher pressure was reported by 80%. Linguistic difficulties, such as lack of vocabulary and complex words, were reported by 60% of students. These findings indicate that both internal psychological states and external social and environmental conditions play significant roles in triggering speaking anxiety among seventh-grade students. The high percentage of students reporting psychological factors suggests that internal barriers are the primary drivers of speaking anxiety. This aligns with Young (1991) framework, which identifies personal and interpersonal anxieties as key sources of language anxiety. Furthermore, the fact that peer pressure and environmental distractions were reported by nearly 90% of students implies that the classroom climate plays a crucial role. When students feel they might be laughed at or when the classroom is noisy, their cognitive resources are divided between managing the speaking task and dealing with social threats, which exacerbates their anxiety.

Azahri (2020) conducted a quantitative study with eighth-grade students and discovered that 80% of them experienced speaking anxiety, with test anxiety occurring more often than other types. The current research's findings reinforce this earlier result, although the percentage of test anxiety in this study was lower (40%). This difference may be due to the age difference between the participants, as eighth-grade students might face higher academic pressure compared to seventh graders, or it could reflect contextual differences between the two schools studied. Hanifa (2018) reported a similar finding in the Indonesian context, identifying that students' worry about appearing incompetent in the eyes of their peers serves as a significant psychological trigger for speaking anxiety. Both studies confirmed that peer pressure and fear of negative evaluation are major contributors to speaking anxiety among Indonesian EFL learners. Theoretically, these findings support Horwitz et al. (1986) model by providing empirical evidence that the three types of speaking anxiety are interconnected and often occur simultaneously. Practically, these results highlight the importance of creating supportive classroom environments that reduce peer pressure and provide students with adequate preparation time before speaking tasks. Teachers should consider implementing strategies such as providing vocabulary scaffolding, allowing students to practice in pairs before performing individually, and establishing a classroom culture where mistakes are viewed as part of the learning process rather than as failures.

Crosby, (2025) raised an important methodological issue, arguing that relying solely on self-report instruments such as the FLCAS can lead to inaccurate findings. This is because students may lack self-awareness or might not provide completely truthful responses about their emotional states. The current research addresses this concern by incorporating direct classroom observation alongside questionnaire data. By triangulating observation data with questionnaire responses for each student, this research provides a richer and more accurate depiction of foreign language classroom anxiety than self-report instruments alone can offer. Badriyah & Novita, (2023) also used a qualitative case study design in their research. However, their work primarily concentrated on classifying different anxiety categories rather than examining how anxiety actually appears through students' immediate behavioral responses. This research extends their work by systematically documenting observable behaviors such as prolonged silence, stuttering, fidgeting, and avoidance of eye contact during authentic classroom speaking activities. These findings offer practical guidance for teachers to recognize visible signs of speaking anxiety and to create more supportive learning environments that reduce nervousness and encourage active participation.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to analyze how speaking anxiety is reflected in the speaking performance of seventh-grade students at SMP Negeri 7 Pekalongan and to identify the factors contributing to their anxiety. The findings revealed that all fifteen students experienced all three types of speaking anxiety simultaneously, with test anxiety being the most dominant type, followed by communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and co-dominance of communication apprehension and test anxiety. The most frequently observed behavioral manifestations included prolonged silence, stuttering, trembling hands, tense facial expressions, and avoidance of eye contact. These findings confirm that speaking anxiety is not a single construct but a multidimensional experience that becomes visibly reflected through students' verbal and non-verbal behaviors during authentic classroom speaking activities.

The factors causing speaking anxiety were found to be both internal and external. Internal factors such as nervousness, shame, fear of making mistakes, low self-confidence, and linguistic difficulties played significant roles. External factors including peer pressure, environmental distractions, and teacher pressure were also major contributors. The triangulation analysis revealed meaningful relationships between dominant anxiety types and their causing factors. Students with test anxiety were primarily driven by teacher and peer pressure, students with fear of negative evaluation by peer pressure and psychological factors, and students with communication apprehension by psychological and linguistic factors. This study contributes theoretically by providing empirical evidence that supports Horwitz et al. (1986) multidimensional model of foreign language anxiety, demonstrating that the three types of anxiety are interconnected and often occur simultaneously. Methodologically, this research addresses Crosby (2025) recommendation by incorporating direct behavioral observation alongside self-report questionnaires, offering a richer and more accurate depiction of classroom anxiety than surveys alone can provide. Practically, the findings offer guidance for teachers to recognize visible signs of speaking anxiety and to create more supportive learning environments. Based on these findings, it is recommended that teachers provide vocabulary scaffolding before speaking tasks, allow adequate preparation time, reduce peer pressure by fostering a respectful classroom culture, and manage classroom noise levels to minimize distractions. For future research, it is suggested to explore speaking anxiety across different educational levels and to develop classroom-based interventions that address each specific type of anxiety.

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