



“Il était une fois”: Podcasting Pedagogy in the French Language Classroom

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Abstract

This paper examines the use of podcasting in the French language classroom as a dynamic, creative pedagogy that promotes linguistic proficiency through role-play, storytelling, and performance using a digital platform. Role-play provides students with a way to internalize the mechanics of language acquisition by lowering anxiety and encouraging experimentation. Building on this practice, podcasting extends role-play through digital storytelling, combining narrative with technology to provide learners with a motivating and multimodal experience.

In this model, students author their own narratives, collaborate with peers, and record polished performances, blending traditional linguistic practice with creative production. The project design is scaffolded across several weeks to mirror the natural progression of language acquisition. Students begin by adopting fictitious identities, then progressively integrate new grammatical structures and vocabulary into short dialogues, culminating in a final recorded performance. This incremental structure creates a safe and playful space for identity experimentation while supporting gradual linguistic development.

Findings suggest that podcasting pedagogy fosters more than grammatical accuracy. By inhabiting imagined roles, students engage in storytelling as a form of meaning-making, situating vocabulary and grammar within coherent narratives. They also develop collaborative habits, practice critical thinking, and express their authentic self by drafting, rehearsing, and editing their recordings. Students report that podcasting builds confidence by allowing them to experiment with language beyond the constraints of a textbook or high-stakes oral exam.

Ultimately, podcasting positions learners not merely as students of French but as emerging storytellers and cultural producers. Integrating imagination, technology, and performance, this pedagogy demonstrates how digital storytelling can transform second language instruction into a creative, student-centered process with broad potential for replication across contexts.

Keywords: podcasting, pedagogy, French language learning, imagination, role-play, digital learning.

1. Introduction

“Il était une fois.” The familiar phrase that opens countless French fairytales invites readers into a fantastical and imaginative journey. Storytelling has long woven fiction into dense networks of meaning, producing narratives passed down from generation to generation (Bruner, 1990). In the realm of higher education language instruction, it is all too easy to allow the lower-order thinking tasks such as memorization, drills, and decontextualized activities, to dominate the classroom, all the while underutilizing the most powerful tool: imagination.

Teaching French necessarily involves grammar, vocabulary, oral and listening skills, and the cultivation of overall communicative competence. Yet textbooks, while invaluable, often neglect the powerful role imagination can play in the language learning process (Krashen, 1982).

Recent scholarship underscores this point. Gillian Judson argues that imagination is not an “add-on” to instruction but a primary way learners make sense of the world, demonstrating how imaginative strategies deepen retention of abstract concepts (45). Simon Coffey similarly highlights the role of multimodal imagination—gesture, image, metaphor—in helping learners construct meaning beyond the limits of traditional drills, expanding their capacity to think creatively in another language (566). For language



learners, imagination is not superfluous but central: it enables them to project themselves into new identities, adopt alternative voices, and rehearse ways of being beyond their current lives.

Role-playing within a fictitious narrative allows instruction to unfold in a natural and engaging way. By stepping into invented identities, students are freed from the constraints of their perceived self-identities and can take risks they might otherwise avoid. Research on role-play in SLA has shown that these activities reduce anxiety and foster experimentation, making them decisive for linguistic progress (Cornillie, Clarebout, and Desmet 264; Lantolf and Thorne 11)). Such imaginative play situates learners in what Vygotsky described as the “zone of proximal development,” a space where risk-taking and scaffolding accelerate growth by engaging “those functions that have not yet matured but are in the process of maturation.” (86).

In my elementary and intermediate French courses, I extend this tradition of narrative play into podcasting projects. Students act simultaneously as authors and performers, crafting stories that integrate targeted grammatical structures and vocabulary. To create is to bring something into existence; to podcast is to render that creation permanent in a digital format. While podcasting pedagogy requires significant preparation, it results in polished recordings that students find both rewarding and memorable. As Md. Masudul Hasan and Tan Bee Hoon have shown, podcasts strengthen both receptive and productive skills while increasing motivation “outside of the classroom” (131). By uniting storytelling, role-play, and digital recording, podcasting pedagogy transforms the classroom into a site of imagination, identity exploration, and lasting engagement.

This paper argues that podcasting pedagogy, grounded in storytelling and role-play, makes imagination the centerpiece of the language classroom in our digital world. Drawing from two case studies in elementary and intermediate French, I demonstrate how carefully scaffolded podcast projects enable students to master grammatical structures while inhabiting new identities and crafting imaginative narratives. In what follows, I situate this approach within theoretical frameworks of storytelling, play, and digital literacies before presenting two classroom models: the novice-level family saga *La Famille Dupont* and the intermediate-level travel narrative *Un Voyage Inoubliable*. These case studies illustrate how podcasting not only fosters linguistic competence but also transforms the classroom into a site of creativity, experimentation, and enduring achievement.

2. Theoretical Framework

The integration of storytelling, role-play, and podcasting in the French classroom builds on established theories in second language acquisition and educational psychology. Each of these dimensions supports language learning in distinct but complementary ways resulting in a dynamic learning environment for my students resulting in “collaborative engagement.” (Wijayanti & Aeni, 313)

Storytelling has long been recognized as a fundamental mode of human thought, enabling learners to construct meaning and situate new knowledge within narrative frameworks (Bruner, 1990). In second language acquisition, narrative tasks create opportunities for comprehensible input and output, allowing students to practice structures in context rather than in isolation (Krashen, 1982).

Role-play extends the narrative dimension by situating students in imagined identities. Vygotskian theory highlights the role of play in learning, noting that the assumption of fictitious roles fosters self-regulation, risk-taking, and experimentation, in particular in an online environment: “The transcripts of online communication show high levels of experimentation and creativity with language and increased participation levels over face-to-face discussion.” (Bodrova, 2008; Lantolf & Thorne, 2006, 209). In SLA contexts, role-play lowers anxiety and encourages learners to engage more fully with linguistic forms, precisely because they are speaking “as” someone else rather than presenting themselves (Cornillie et al., 2012).

Podcasting brings permanence to this creative process. Digital storytelling combines audio, performance, and collaboration, allowing students to author, rehearse, and record narratives that showcase targeted vocabulary and grammar. Recent studies show that podcasting fosters oral proficiency, motivation, and digital literacy, while also promoting collaboration and learner autonomy (Hasan, 2013; Chaves-Yuste,



2023; Peng, 2025). By integrating imagination with structured scaffolding, podcasting pedagogy situates learners not only as students of French but also as storytellers and cultural producers.

2.1 Imagination as a Pedagogical Driving Force

In the context of language learning, imagination is more than a creative flourish—it is a fundamental cognitive and affective resource. Stephen Ryan and Sarah Mercer argue that much of the foreign language experience constitutes a “growth mindset that situates learners as agents of their own learning.” (9) Their work highlights how imagination underpins learners’ capacity to situate themselves in alternative perspectives and identities. Similarly, Gillian Judson demonstrates how imaginative framing can transform ordinary grammar lessons into engaging experiences, showing how the introduction of verb tenses, for example, can be taught through metaphorical “spells” that transport verbs backward or forward in time (45). Such approaches embed abstract concepts in narratives that learners can visualize and internalize. Imagination also supports affective engagement. Simon Coffey emphasizes that multimodal and embodied forms of imagination—gestures, images, metaphors—help learners approach linguistic structures from multiple angles (563). In his call for “creative language pedagogies,” Coffey argues that imagination must be treated not as peripheral but as integral to meaning-making. Likewise, Bernie Warren and Sheila Robbie describe how learners “try on” voices and identities through imaginative play, a process that strengthens ownership of new language forms and by “using their creativity and story-making powers, they imagine meanings beyond meanings and make connections.” (3) Taken together, these studies frame imagination as a mediating tool: it lowers anxiety, increases motivation, and invites learners into spaces of experimentation where language acquisition can flourish.

2.2 Storytelling and Narrative

Storytelling provides the first foundation for imagination in the French classroom. Jerome Bruner situates narrative as a fundamental mode of human thought, enabling learners to construct meaning by organizing events into coherent plots (39). Within SLA, storytelling creates contexts for comprehensible input and output, as learners are not only exposed to authentic language but also required to produce meaningful discourse (Krashen 21). David Poveda argues that narrative tasks facilitate proficiency by embedding grammar and vocabulary into stories rather than isolated drills and praises how the shared experiences of each student contributes to “the class as a community with its own history, values and group identity. (398).

The pedagogical value of storytelling lies in its ability to contextualize structures. A verb conjugated in the abstract may feel mechanical, but when situated within a narrative—“Hier, Luc a mangé du fromage, mais Julie n'en a pas voulu”—it becomes meaningful, memorable, and repeatable. Storytelling therefore provides both the scaffolding and the motivation for students to experiment with linguistic forms.

2.3 Role-play and Identity

If storytelling supplies the narrative frame, role-play animates it with lived voices. Vygotsky underscores the role of play in cognitive and social development, arguing that learners can operate within a “zone of proximal development” by rehearsing new skills in imaginative contexts (102). Elena Bodrova extends this idea by showing how pretend play fosters self-regulation and higher mental functions (14).

Within SLA, role-play serves two critical functions. First, it lowers affective barriers. As Frederik Cornillie, Geraldine Clarebout, and Piet Desmet note, learners are often more willing to take risks when speaking “as” someone else, since errors are attributed to the role rather than the self (264). Second, role-play enables identity exploration. James Lantolf and Steven Thorne emphasize that language learning is not simply the acquisition of forms but also the negotiation of identities and the “capacity to externalize augmented communicative repertoires open up possibilities for new social roles. (233). When learners embody characters, they step outside familiar roles and rehearse voices that may differ from their own.



This experimentation not only develops fluency but also helps students see themselves as legitimate users of the target language.

2.4 Podcasting and Digital Storytelling

Podcasting represents a modern extension of storytelling and role-play, adding the dimension of digital permanence. Mahbub Hasan identifies podcasts as powerful tools for supporting both receptive (listening) and productive (speaking) skills, while also motivating learners (61). Joaquín Chaves-Yuste demonstrates their positive impact on learner confidence, oral proficiency, and engagement (50). More recent studies highlight podcasting's ability to foster collaboration, digital literacy, and learner autonomy (Peng; Baek). Podcasting also amplifies imagination through multimodality. Students not only script and perform stories but may also add sound effects, music, or costumes, as observed in my own classroom. Coffey's call for multimodal imaginative pedagogy resonates here: podcasting is not merely an oral task but a multimodal production where voice, creativity, and technology intersect (564). Moreover, because podcasts are recorded, they create an artifact of learning. Students can hear—and see—their progress, which reinforces confidence and provides a tangible sense of achievement.

2.5 Synthesis

Together, storytelling, role-play, and podcasting establish a pedagogical triad that embeds imagination into the structure of the French classroom. Storytelling offers narrative coherence, role-play enables identity experimentation, and podcasting renders the process permanent. Grounded in sociocultural and narrative theories, this triad transforms grammar and vocabulary practice into lived experiences. Learners do not simply repeat forms; they inhabit them. In doing so, they discover that learning French is not only about acquiring communicative competence but also about entering other imaginative worlds.

3. Case Study 1: Elementary Classroom: la Famille Dupont

3.1 Framing the Project

In French 1010, an introductory course aligned with ACTFL novice-level proficiencies, I implemented the podcast project *La Famille Dupont* during the final five weeks of the semester. At this level, students are expected to produce memorized phrases and short sentences with limited control. Role-play provides a bridge between practice and meaningful use, creating what Vygotsky describes as a “zone of proximal development” where learners rehearse skills with imaginative support (102). By adopting fictitious roles of a family tree belonging to the entire class, students engaged in narrative play that both lowered affective barriers and encouraged experimentation with form, an outcome Cornillie, Clarebout, and Desmet also observe in their study of role-play in SLA (264).

The design of the project followed two guiding principles. First, each weekly task aligned with ongoing grammar and vocabulary lessons to ensure integration with course objectives. Second, the project preserved a narrative arc, so grammar would not appear as isolated drills but as parts of an unfolding family story. Bruner reminds us that narrative coherence is central to learning, as learners retain structures more effectively when they are situated in meaningful contexts (39).

3.2 Week-by-Week Scaffolding

Week 1: Establishing Identity

Students adopted characters from a five-generation fictitious family tree presented in PowerPoint. They practiced introductions, family vocabulary, and possessive adjectives, culminating in a five-minute partner dialogue: “Bonjour, je m'appelle Luc Dupont. Je suis le père de la famille Dupont.” “Bonjour, je m'appelle Julie Dupont. Je suis la mère. J'ai 42 ans et j'aime cuisiner.” By embodying characters, students explored



“ways of being they do not experience in their own lives,” echoing Ryan and Mercer’s observation that imagination allows learners to project themselves into alternative identities (118).

Week 2: Describing the Family

Lessons on descriptive and possessive adjectives aligned with a partner dialogue. Students focused on agreement in gender and number while describing family members: “Voici Julie Dupont. Julie est ma mère. Elle est très gentille et drôle.” Accuracy was prioritized over complexity, consistent with Krashen’s view that comprehensible input and low-pressure output foster acquisition more effectively than premature complexity (21).

Week 3: Les Dupont comptent leurs sous

This week emphasized interrogatives (est-ce que, inversion) and numbers 0–100. Students interviewed partners about family members’ ages—“Quel âge a ta mère ?” “Ma mère a quarante-deux ans.”—and played a “mystery number” game where each chose a number (e.g., 37) and challenged their partner to find the closest family member’s age. This playful framing reflects Judson’s argument that imagination transforms abstract grammar practice into memorable, engaging activity (45).

Week 4: Un dîner chez les Dupont

Food vocabulary and the partitive article (du pain, de la salade, du fromage, du thé) were introduced through menu planning for a family dinner. Students collaboratively designed menus while expressing preferences: “Luc adore le fromage, mais Julie déteste le poisson.” The role-play dimension contextualized the partitive, a structure that can otherwise feel abstract, making it more comprehensible and concrete in line with Poveda’s findings on narrative-based grammar tasks (41).

Week 5: Où vont les Dupont ?

Students practiced the irregular verb *aller* and the *futur proche* while planning family outings: “Où allons-nous demain ?” “Nous allons au parc.” “Pourquoi ?” “Parce qu’il fait beau.” By combining interrogatives with future structures, students rehearsed authentic question-answer exchanges, a process that supports the development of communicative competence (Chaves-Yuste 51).

Week 6: Final Podcast – Une journée avec les Dupont

The final task required students to synthesize vocabulary and grammar from previous weeks into a polished family story. Drafts were peer-reviewed for content and accuracy before the final recording. Many groups added creative twists—such as an outing gone comically wrong—illustrating Warren and Robbie’s finding that imaginative play fosters learner agency and engagement (428). The final recording provided not only a performance but also an artifact of learning, confirming Coffey’s claim that multimodal productions deepen engagement by blending creativity, voice, and technology (564). The project concludes with a class showcase and reflections, where students often note both the challenge and the creativity of the process: *“It was a fun, creative experience where we got to create fake scenarios and let our imaginations run wild.”*

3.3 Student Reflections and Outcomes

Student reflections highlight three consistent themes: creativity, confidence, and challenge. Many described the project as liberating: “It was a fun, creative experience where we got to create fake scenarios and let our imaginations run wild.” Others emphasized the motivational value of seeing their progress: “Watching myself speaking French on video was surreal. It showed how much I had improved.”

Some noted the difficulty of sustaining ten-minute recordings, but even this challenge was framed positively: “Stretching the podcast to fit the time requirement was sometimes difficult, but it pushed us to be more creative.” Their responses align with Mark Fettes’ claim in his “The Ties that Bind: How Imagination Grasps the World” that imagination helps us “grasp hidden forms of order and unrealized possibilities in the world.” (3) Overall, the Dupont project demonstrated how storytelling and role-play, scaffolded toward a podcast, transformed abstract grammatical structures into lived experiences. Students not only practiced novice-level proficiencies but also experimented with voice and identity, confirming that imagination is central to acquisition, not supplemental.



4. Case Study 2 – Intermediate Classroom: un Voyage Inoubliable

4.1 Framing the Project

In French 1020, the second semester of the elementary sequence, students build upon novice-level skills by expanding their range of expression across time. A central challenge at this stage is mastering the distinction between *passé composé* (completed actions) and *imparfait* (ongoing descriptions). Bardovi-Harlig and Reynolds note that learners often struggle to align form with function when narrating in the past, as the choice between these tenses depends not only on grammar but also on discourse-level interpretation (112). To address this challenge, I designed the podcast project *Un Voyage Inoubliable* (“An Unforgettable Journey”), which situated tense-aspect practice within the imaginative frame of real or fictional travel. Narrative-based pedagogy, as Bruner emphasizes, allows learners to organize time, causality, and perspective into coherent wholes (43), making it a natural fit for tense-aspect acquisition.

4.2 Week-by-Week Scaffolding

- **Week 1 – Brainstorming**
Students worked with partners to answer targeted questions such as “*Tu préfères la mer ou la montagne ?*” and “*Quelles activités aimes-tu faire ?*” These guided prompts encouraged the use of newly acquired vocabulary while sparking creative ideas. Each student then drafted a short, ten-sentence travel story, either from personal experience or imagination, using both *passé composé* and *imparfait*. This low-stakes task aligns with Krashen’s view that early narrative output supports acquisition when accuracy demands remain secondary to fluency and creativity (22).
- **Week 2 – Developing the Scenario (*La trame de l’histoire*)**
Students distinguished between completed actions to be conjugated in *passé composé* and descriptive background elements to be expressed in *imparfait*. Classroom discussion frequently revealed negotiation and debate, as students deliberated whether a verb conveyed sequence or description. This metalinguistic reflection mirrors Swain’s notion of collaborative dialogue, in which learners co-construct knowledge while producing language (103).
- **Week 3 – Perfectionnement**
At this stage, students finalized their scripts, enriching narratives with precise travel vocabulary and sensory detail. Many employed hyperbolic or dramatic language to heighten the effect: “*La tempête était énorme et les vagues étaient plus hautes qu’une maison.*” Such creative embellishments resonate with Warren and Robbie’s claim that imaginative play encourages risk-taking and experimentation beyond typical classroom boundaries (429). Oral rehearsal emphasized pacing and pronunciation, linking narrative content with performance skills.
- **Week 4 – Podcast Recording**
Students recorded their stories in pairs, each narrating a segment of 3–4 minutes. Many integrated background music or sound effects, demonstrating Coffey’s observation that multimodal imagination allows learners to combine voice, sound, and creativity into meaningful productions (565). Far from being a mere oral exam, the podcast became a collaborative performance, requiring students to consider energy, tone, and audience engagement.
- **Week 5 – Sharing and Reflection**
The final week was dedicated to viewing the podcasts in class, creating a celebratory atmosphere. Several students described the experience as “surreal,” emphasizing the novelty of watching themselves speak French. Others highlighted the motivational role of creativity, noting how music, costumes, and humor elevated the task. Even students who initially found it challenging to sustain longer recordings recognized the value of the process, echoing Judson’s argument that imaginative framing sustains engagement and enhances retention (46).



4.3 Student Outcomes and Reflections

Student reflections consistently emphasized three outcomes: growth, creativity, and confidence. Many acknowledged the difficulty of distinguishing between *passé composé* and *imparfait* but noted that the repeated, contextualized practice solidified their understanding: “*Differentiating between the passé composé and the imparfait is still a challenge, but practicing really does help.*” Others reflected on lexical gains, explaining that the desire to personalize stories pushed them to research and incorporate new vocabulary.

Equally significant were the affective outcomes. Students described podcasting as liberating: “*It was fun to create fake scenarios and let our imaginations run wild.*” For some, the recording itself was transformative: “*Seeing ourselves perform the story showed how far we had come since the beginning.*” These reflections affirm Ryan and Mercer’s claim that imagination allows learners to envision themselves as new language users, experimenting with identities that extend beyond the classroom (119).

5. Pedagogical Implications

The podcast projects in French 1010 (*La Famille Dupont*) and French 1020 (*Un Voyage Inoubliable*) demonstrate how storytelling, role-play, and digital recording can transform language instruction. Each element supports language learning in distinct but complementary ways: storytelling provides narrative scaffolding, role-play enables identity experimentation, and podcasting renders the process permanent through multimodal performance. Together, they reposition imagination at the center of pedagogy, offering broader implications for both language teaching and assessment.

5.1 Imagination as a Driving Force

In both projects, imagination provided the foundation for linguistic growth. For novice learners in *La Famille Dupont*, adopting fictitious family roles lowered anxiety and enabled students to produce language more freely, echoing Cornillie, Clarebout, and Desmet’s finding that role-play fosters experimentation by allowing learners to speak “as” someone else (264). At the intermediate level, students in *Un Voyage Inoubliable* described their work as “surreal” but motivating, confirming Judson’s argument that imaginative framing sustains engagement and retention (46). Across levels, imagination functioned as what Ryan and Mercer describe as a resource for projecting “possible selves” in the target language (118).

5.2 Storytelling and Narrative Coherence

The scaffolding of both projects illustrates how narrative can anchor grammatical practice. In *La Famille Dupont*, structures such as possessive adjectives, interrogatives, and partitive articles were contextualized within family life: “*Luc adore le fromage, mais Julie déteste le poisson.*” In *Un Voyage Inoubliable*, students chose between *passé composé* and *imparfait* to distinguish events from descriptions, situating tense-aspect learning within travel narratives. As Bruner reminds us, narrative provides coherence to new knowledge (39), and as Poveda shows, embedding grammar in stories makes it more meaningful and memorable (41).

5.3 Role-Play, Risk-Taking, and Identity

Role-play proved decisive in both projects, confirming Vygotsky’s claim that imaginative play extends learners into a “zone of proximal development” where they can experiment with forms beyond their current level (102). For 1010 students, adopting a family identity was liberating: mistakes could be attributed to “Luc” or “Julie” rather than themselves. For 1020 students, narrating as travelers allowed them to dramatize experiences in ways that stretched their linguistic repertoires. As Lantolf and Thorne argue, language learning is as much about negotiating identities as acquiring forms (11). By inhabiting



characters and narrators, students began to see themselves not just as learners but as speakers of French.

5.4 Podcasting as Creative Assessment

Unlike traditional oral exams, which emphasize accuracy under pressure, podcasts shifted assessment toward creativity, collaboration, and process. Students had time to draft, rehearse, and revise before recording, transforming assessment into what Swain calls “collaborative dialogue” (103). In both case studies, students highlighted the motivational power of seeing themselves perform in French. This aligns with Coffey’s claim that multimodal productions deepen engagement by allowing learners to integrate voice, image, and sound (565). Moreover, because the recordings became artifacts of learning, students could hear and reflect on their own progress—an advantage rarely afforded by ephemeral oral exams.

6. Conclusion

“Il était une fois,” the timeless phrase that opens French fairytales, invites readers into a world of imagination and possibility. In the French classroom, podcasting pedagogy reclaims this invitation, adapting the magic of storytelling to the digital age. At Brooklyn College, podcasting projects allow students to step beyond memorization and drills to inhabit new identities, construct narratives, and render their creations permanent. By weaving together storytelling, role-play, and digital recording, students experience language learning not merely as the acquisition of grammar and vocabulary, but as a creative act of becoming storytellers in French.

The two case studies demonstrate how imagination reshapes the learning process at multiple levels. In *La Famille Dupont*, novice learners situated family vocabulary and grammar in the imaginative world of a multi-generational saga. In *Un Voyage Inoubliable*, intermediate students explored the complex distinction between passé composé and imparfait through travel narratives, treating grammar not as mechanical but as interpretive. Across levels, students consistently described podcasting as liberating, surreal, and motivating—confirming Judson’s claim that imagination sustains engagement (46) and Ryan and Mercer’s observation that learners project “possible selves” through language (118).

Although developed in introductory and intermediate French courses, this model extends beyond grammar instruction. I have adapted podcasting in a First-Year Seminar on French culture, where students created imaginative podcasts on intellectual figures such as Zola, Sartre, and Foucault. As Hasan demonstrates, podcasting supports both productive and receptive skills (61), while Chaves-Yuste emphasizes its positive impact on motivation and oral proficiency (50). These findings suggest that podcasting pedagogy is not limited to language mechanics but can enrich courses in literature, culture, and intellectual history as well.

The evidence from both *La Famille Dupont* and *Un Voyage Inoubliable* supports a broader pedagogical claim: imagination must be a central driving force in language education. Storytelling situates grammar within narrative, role-play liberates learners to take risks through new identities, and podcasting transforms fleeting classroom practice into enduring creation in our digital world. Together, these dimensions build dynamic, collaborative, and imaginative environments where students move beyond repetition to authentic expression. As one student reflected, “It was fun to create fake scenarios and let our imaginations run wild.” That imaginative leap—into another voice, another identity—is precisely where language acquisition takes root.

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