WHAT IS 'LANGUAGE TEACHING'?
by
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Many years ago, I was asked to review the "Bullock" Report *"A Language for Life"* (1975). I was delighted. Sacred cows lay dead in droves. The Report wryly observed that, whilst there is, indeed, a great need to promote the development of the ability to communicate, most of what most teachers teach in language classes was invented by teachers for no other reason than to have some *content* to teach — and it benefited their pupils not one iota. The paradox that, while there is so much which does need to be done in schools, so much of what is done confers so few benefits on pupils is one of the most fundamental issues meriting the attention of researchers.

In this article I would like to continue the tradition established by the Bullock Committee. I would also like to suggest that the paradox just mentioned has to do with the ease of specifying and assessing *content*, and the difficulty of identifying and assessing educational processess, areas of competence, and motivational dispositions. It is necessary to caution, however, that this is not a fully-developed position paper. Rather, it is an attempt by a researcher, whose main experience lies outwith the language area, to set down some of the things he has learnt about language teaching in the course of a project primarily concerned with other things.

It is convenient to begin by making reference to an apparent inconsistency within another official report — The Scottish HMI's *Learning and Teaching in Primary Four and Primary Seven* (1979). In one place, the Inspectors say that " The Scottish Primary Teacher insists on making her pupils numerate and literate. She does not, however, sufficiently recognise that there are fields of human experience and competency beyond these". Despite the apparently positive evaluation of achievement in the areas of literacy and numeracy embodied in the above quotation, it is therefore remarkable to note that the Inspectors elsewhere reported that very little of the language

work they observed was set in an extended context. Muct of it consisted solely of filling in blanks in sentences.

In our own work, we confirmed that there was very little writing of extended prose. There was still less language activity set in an extended time context. This was true whether one defined an "extended time context" to mean multiple revisions of material in the light of feedback or to involve exploring the historical origins of a current problem and planning the activities which would be required to get something done about it. There was little written material set in an extended *content* context involving perhaps, reporting the results of an enquiry into the adequacy of a proposed new traffic scheme — an enquiry which might demand sociological, geological, and economic studies. There was little evidence of written material being set in an extended communicative context involving, perhaps, graphic material, innuendo, gesture and the communication of feelings and ideas through the use of non-verbal contextural cues.

There was also very little use of language to enhance effective behaviour. There was for example, little use of language to identify and channel the emotions, bring to bear relevant past experiences, identify obstacles in the future and find ways round them, articulate new ideas or personal feelings, identify personal strengths and interests, identify the strengths and weaknesses of others, persuade others to support one, think about and influence the social structure in which one lives and works, or orchestrate group activity to achieve joint goals. In other words, developing the ability to *use* language to retrieve relevant information (from people as well as from books), to express the results of reflection and observation, to communicate, to achieve social goals, or to improve personal psychological functioning, was overlooked.

Not only were these "high level" language activities rarely present, little attempt was even made to develop a range of reading speeds and strategies — speeds and strategies suited, for example, to locating material relevant to achieving one's goals or to appreciating deep and hidden meaning. Little attempt was made to develop the skills needed to listen to the unexpressed content of messages — whether spoken or written.

Likewise, there was little attempt to lead pupils to study the structure of written material so that they could identify effective strategies for communicating different types of content. Little effort was made to encourage pupils to develop the habit of revising their own writings. Little effort was made to develop an awareness of the value of discussion and comment as a strategy which would help them to improve their drafts. Little effort was made to develop an awareness of the use of content and style to convey an impression. Little effort was made to lead pupils to feel that they had a *right* to ask questions, and to expect others to make use of information which was provided without its having been asked for.

Given all these omissions (which apply to secondary schools as well as primary schools (Spencer, 1983)), how could the Inspectors come to the conclusion that the pupils *were* literate? The answer is: "Only by adopting a criterion of 'literacy' which did not include these other goals and by assessing 'literacy' without reference to the uses to which language is put". In other words, by focussing on mastery of the very teacher-generated criterion of knowledge of content, the value of which had been seriously called into question by Bullock many years earlier.

Yet we *did* find teachers who encouraged their pupils to engage in one or other of *all* the activities mentioned above. There was a strong association between teachers' use of environmentally-based, inter-disciplinary, enquiry-oriented, "methods" of education and high-level language teaching. However, it must be stressed that it seemed to be those teachers who wished to pursue the wider goals mentioned above (and to foster other competencies identified in Raven, 1984) who used competence-oriented, project-based, methods of education as a vehicle to achieve these goals, rather than the reverse: the use of environmentally-based project work does not necessarily lead to the pursuit of higher-level goals.

Before launching into discussion of what was done by one teacher or another, it is useful to draw attention to a very fundamental difference of opinion in the theoretical literature. One school of thought, represented, for example, in the earlier writings of Bereiter (1966), holds, that, if children ar to learn to think, they must be supplied with the necessary words and concepts, and they must be taught the rules of language. Another school of thought, best represented by Spearman (1923) and Macnamara (1972) argues that the rules of language, communication, and thought are so complex that no-one has ever managed to make them explicit. Furthermore, there are many different *types* of effective communication which are suited to different purposes and material, and different cognitive styles. The best that can be done, therefore, is to enhance pupils' tendency to think, to analyse, to pay attention to feedback, and to act on the basis of self-generated information. (Although Bereiter and his colleagues (Scardamalia *et al*, 1981) have come to pay more attention to motivation, they still propose exercises designed to teach pupils particular lessons, rather than activities which are designed to promote the development of generic competencies and analytic habits. Likewise, they still fail to acknowledge the importance of individualising educational provision. As Spencer (1983) has indicated, however, their exercises are capable of further development in the direction indicated.)

It is the position that pupils must be encouraged to develop analytic habits which is implicit in the educational process advocated by those who make effective use of environmentally-based, enquiry-oriented, project-based, strategies of education. The objective is to manoeuvre children into situations in which they will have something important to learn, something *new* to communicate, something they want to communicate, an interested audience to whom to communicate it, and an opportunity, not only to gain feedback and analyse its implications, but also to capitalise on that feedback in the course of subsequent activity. The aim is to develop the spontaneous tendency to observe, to analyse, to be sensitive to, and to be able to use, feedback which has not been made explicit.

This position embodies some very fundamental assumptions. In the first place, it assumes that all children will be motivated to acquire linguistic competencies as a result of being able to pursue topics which are personally important to them. Further, that they will have an opportunity to strive to improve their performance at tasks in the same area over an extended period of time. If their work is not set in an extended time context it will not be worthwhile for them to seek and act on feedback. It will not be worth worrying about how to improve their performance. They will not have an opportunity to overcome

the inhibition to revision which is associated with having just completed a first draft. It will not be worth their while to try to modify their behaviour as a result of what they had previously learnt from studying the effectiveness of their communicative endeavours. They must therefore have something to say which is important to them and to their audience. They must *have* an audience interested in the topic and not merely a teacher whose interests they may not share and whose judgment is liable to be open to question.

But there are actually still more serious assumptions behind the position adopted by those who advocate individualised, enquiry-based, competence-oriented programmes of education. The most common explanation of communication failures is incorrect. People do not, on the whole, fail to communicate because they lack communication *skills*. They fail to communicate because they think that they have no right to say anything. Even if they did say something, they believe, they have no right to demand that those to whom they wish to say it should listen to them. Indeed, they believe that, even if they did express an opinion, those in authority would not, indeed should not, listen to them. Likewise, the belief that people not only can, but should, formulate and ask their own questions, be able to find their own answers to them, expect to be able to make those answers known, and expect notice to be taken of them, is not always widely accepted.

To create a developmental environment which will lead pupils to practise and develop written and spoken language skills, it is therefore not only necessary for teachers to treat their pupils with respect, as people who are entitled to have views and opinions of their own, but also to encourage the pupils to develop changed expectations of themselves and about the way society can, and should, operate, and their own place in it.

Attention may also be drawn to the fact that, while, in the course of developing an effective communication designed to say something one wishes to say, one goes through several drafts, obtains feedback and suggestions from others, and rethinks and revises one's ideas, this process is very different from producing "fair copy" for no other purpose than that of satisfying teacher demands. In the latter process, the emphasis tends to be on neatness and tidyness for its own sake, and on conforming to a teacher-selected, and teacher-specific, set of

language conventions. A corollary of the former position is that, in the absence of formal standards, it is necessary for pupils to have a real audience, interested in the topic, and something which they themselves wish to say, both to establish a criterion of effective communication and to obtain feedback from the audience. The implicit assumption behind this view is that the child, and only the child, can study the communication process in which he is engaged, and work out for himself (not necessarily explicitly) ways in which to improve his methods through discussion with others. The pupil must be encouraged to go after half-formulated ideas, grasp them, articulate them, and express them in effective ways. In this way pupils will come to expect to clarify their ideas by expressing them. This is very different from the position most commonly advocated by teachers. This is that pupils should be clear about what they are going to say before they say anything. The position advocated here is that, *as a result of* speaking and writing, pupils will come to realise what it was that they wanted to say. As a result of using words they do not understand they will not only familiarise themselves with concepts, words and theories, they will actively contribute to the process whereby words are reinterpreted and given new and better meanings.

In the remainder of this article an attempt will be made to systematise and extend what has been said. This will be done under two headings.

USE OF LANGUAGE FOR INTER-PERSONAL PURPOSES

One obvious function of language is to communicate to others, both in speech and in writing. To practise the required skills it is necessary to have something important to say and someone to whom what one wishes to say is potentially of value. In practise, we have found few schools where spoken language received a significant amount of attention and even fewer where pupils' writing related to anything which was of personal importance. Even less widely recognised was the fact that spoken or written material was only one part of a communicative package — involving gestures, art, diagrams, mathematical material, colour, texture, presentation and evoked feelings. To practise effective *communication* skills, all these would need to be practised in the context of a total communicative act. Still less frequently observed was the use of language to analyse the effectiveness of a total com-

municative strategy — which aspects of the process were communicating what messages, which were failing, what were the barriers to more effective communication of information, ideas and feelings? And how could the audience be got into a more receptive frame of mind? Still less was language used to make explicit what it was that the gestures, gaze and posture of an audience have to tell one about the effectiveness of one's communicative strategies.

Another obvious use of language is to obtain information. But *which* information — information the teacher wants (and probably already has) or information which will enable one to lead one's own life more effectively? The latter is much more likely to lead one to develop effective information retrieval strategies. Was the information to be obtained from books, prised out of the heads of experts, members of the community, or generated anew from archaeological, social, political and scientific studies? Even in relation to books, little effort was usually made to develop effective retrieval skills — examining the structure for key phrases, skimming skills to locate relevant inform- ation, detailed reading and marking crucial passages on the books. The use of language to analyse effective information retrieval processes was conspicuous by its absence. Few teachers encouraged their pupils to develop the ability to hear what was *not* said — to read between the lines, to interpret innuendo, to note what was avoided, to "read" gestures and voice and gaze inflections, to examine unquestioned assumptions, to ignore that which was not relevant to their own purposes, to mull over the implications of what was said and to make explicit the cause of feelings of unease about it.

But besides communicating and retrieving *information*, and analysing' the effectiveness of communication processes, language is used for a host of inter-personal purposes. It is used to *prevent* other people saying what they think and asking embarrassing questions. It is used to conceal feelings. It is used to persuade, cajole and bully others into complying with one's wishes. It is used to think about the talents of others and how to capitalise upon and develop those talents. It is used to articulate shared values and the means to be used to reach them. It is used to evade control. It is used to signify one's assent to values expressed in group meetings, to assent to group processes,

and to endorse group feelings. All of these are uses of language which could be usefully practised by pupils in schools.

USE OF LANGUAGE FOR PSYCHOLOGICAL PURPOSES

We have mentioned the use of language to analyse the effective- ness of communication strategies, to think about the values, priorities and talents of colleagues and how they could be developed, utilised and rewarded — or cajoled into compliance with one's own purposes. But language is also used to bring to bear relevant past experiences, to reflect on the effectiveness of any one particular course of action, to anticipate obstacles in the future and seek ways round them, to think about one's feelings and emotions, and to think about one's *own* talents, strengths and priorities. It is used to give expression to one's feelings and ideas. It is used to think about group processes and how they can be influenced. It is used to think about, and make explicit, the shared values and thought-wags of a society. It is used to make explicit how societies and organisations work and what can be done to influence them. Not only are concepts used to solve problems, language can be used to think about and make explicit the strategies to be used to evolve the concepts which are required to solve problems. It is used to make other people's concepts one's own, and, in the process, to trans- form those concepts. Through discussion one clarifies what it is that one thinks. All of these are activities which some teachers used com- petence-oriented, project- and enquiry-based, educational activities grounded in the environment not only to lead pupils to do, but also to develop the meta-strategies they require to become better at doing.

It was originally intended to conclude this article by describing the activities of a number of teachers effectively pursuing some of these goals. In practice, it emerged that the accounts which could have been included would have been such a shallow selection from what was available that the best course of action seemed to be to refer interested readers to our forthcoming publication (Raven, Johnston and Varley; 1985).

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Reflections from observations in Primary School Classrooms

JOHN RAVEN
Scottish Council for Research in Education

Many years ago, I was asked to review the "Bullock" Report *A Language for Life* (1975). I was delighted. Sacred cows lay dead in droves. The Report wryly observed that, whilst there is, indeed, a great need to promote the development of the ability to communicate, most of what most teachers teach in language classes was invented by teachers for no other reason than to have some *content* to teach—and it benefited their pupils, not one iota. The paradox that, while there is so much which does need to be done in schools, so much of what is done confers so few benefits on pupils is one of the most fundamental issues meriting the attention of researchers.

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It is convenient to begin by making reference to an apparent inconsistency within another official report—The Scottish HMI's *Learning and Teaching in Primary Four and Primary Seven* (1979). In one place, the Inspectors say that "The Scottish Primary Teacher insists on making her pupils numerate and literate. She does not, however, sufficiently recognise that there are fields of human experience and competency beyond these". Despite the apparently positive evaluation of achievement in the areas of literacy and numeracy embodied in the above quotation, it is therefore remarkable to note that the Inspectors elsewhere reported that very little of the language work they observed was set in an extended context. Much of it consisted solely of filling in blanks in sentences.

In our own work (which took us as observers into many classrooms) we confirmed that there was very little writing of extended prose. There was still less language activity set in an extended time context. This was true whether one defined an "extended time context" to mean multiple revisions of material in the light of feedback or to involve exploring the historical origins of a current problem and planning the activities which would be required to get something done about it. There was little written material set in an extended *content* context involving, perhaps, reporting the results of an enquiry into the adequacy of a proposed new traffic scheme—an enquiry which might demand sociological, geological, and economic studies. There was little evidence of written material being set in an extended communicative context involving, perhaps, graphic material, innuendo, gesture and the communication of feelings and ideas through the use of non-verbal contextural cues.

There was also very little use of language to enhance effective behaviour. There was, for example, little use of language to identify and channel the emotions, bring to bear relevant past experiences, identify obstacles in the future and find ways round them, articulate new ideas or personal feelings, identify personal strengths and interests, identify the strengths and weaknesses of others, persuade others to support one, think about and influence the social structure in which one lives and works, or orchestrate group activity to achieve joint goals. In other words, developing the ability to *use* language to retrieve relevant information (from people as well as from books), to express the results of reflection and observation, to communicate, to achieve social goals, or to improve personal psychological functioning, was overlooked.

Not only were these "high level" language activities rarely present, little attempt was even made to develop a range of reading speeds and strategies—speeds and strategies suited, for example, to locating material relevant to

achieving one's goals or to appreciating deep and hidden meaning. Little attempt was made to develop the skills needed to listen to the unexpressed content of message—whether spoken or written.

Likewise, there was little attempt to lead pupils to study the structure of written material so that they could identify effective strategies for communicating different types of content. Little effort was made to encourage pupils to develop the habit of revising their own writings. Little effort was made to develop an awareness of the value of discussion and comment as a strategy which would help them to improve their drafts. Little effort was made to develop an awareness of the use of context and style to convey an impression. Little effort was made to lead pupils to feel that they had a *right* to ask questions, and to expect others to make use of information which was provided without its having been asked for.

Given all these omissions—which apply to secondary schools as well as primary schools (Spencer, 1983), how could the inspectors come to the conclusion that the pupils *were* literate? The anwer is: "Only by adopting a criterion of 'literacy' which did not include these other goals and by assessing 'literacy' without reference to the uses to which language is put". In other words, by focussing on mastery of the very teacher-generated criteria of knowledge of content, the value of which had been seriously called into question by Bullock many years earlier.

Yet we *did* find teachers who encouraged their pupils to engage in one or other of *all* the activities mentioned above. There was a strong association between teachers' use of environmentally-based, inter-disciplinary, enquiry-oriented "methods" of education and high-level language teaching. However, it must be observed that it seemed to be those teachers who wished to pursue the wider goals mentioned above (and to foster other competencies identified in Raven, 1984) who used competence-oriented, project-based methods of education as a vehicle to achieve these goals, rather than the reverse: *the use of environmentally-based project work does not necessarily lead to the pursuit of higher-level goals.*

Before launching into discussion of what was done by one teacher or another, it is useful to draw attention to a very fundamental difference of opinion in the theoretical

literature. One school of thought, represented, for example, in the earlier writings of Bereiter (1966), holds that, if children are to learn to think, they must be supplied with the necessary words and concepts, and they must be taught the rules of language. Another school of thought, best represented by Spearman (1923) and Macnamara (1972) argued that the rules of language, communication, and thought are so complex that no-one has ever managed to make them explicit. Furthermore, there are many different *types* of effective communication which are suited to different purposes and material, and different cognitive styles. The best that can be done, therefore, is to enhance pupils' tendency to think, to analyse, to pay attention to feedback, and to act on the basis of self-generated information. (Although Bereiter and his colleagues, Scardamalia *et al*, 1981, have come to pay more attention to motivation, they still propose exercises designed to teach pupils particular lessons, rather than activities which are designed to promote the development of generic competencies and analytic habits. Likewise, they still fail to acknowledge the importance of individualising educational provision. As Spencer, 1983, has indicated, however, their exercises are capable of further development towards the alternative position).

This position requires that children should be brought into situations in which they will have something important to learn, something *new* to communicate, something they want to communicate, an interested audience to whom to communicate it, and an opportunity, not only to gain feedback and analyse its implications, but also to capitalise on the feedback in the course of subsequent activity. The aim is to develop the spontaneous tendency to observe, to analyse, to be sensitive to, and to be able to use, feedback which has not been made explicit.

This position embodies some very fundamental assumptions. In the first place, it assumes that all children will be motivated to acquire linguistic competencies as a result of being able to pursue topics which are personally important to them. Further, that they will have an opportunity to strive to improve their performance at tasks in the same area over an extended period of time. If their work is not set in an extended time context it will not be worthwhile for them to seek and act on feedback. It will not be worth worrying about how to improve their performance. They will

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not have an opportunity to overcome the inhibition to revision which is associated with having just completed a first draft. It will not be worth their while to try to modify their behaviour as a result of what they had previously learnt from studying the effectiveness of their communicative endeavours. They must therefore have something to say which is important to them and to their audience. They must *have* an audience interested in the topic and not merely a teacher whose interests they may not share and whose judgment is liable to be open to question.

But there are actually still more serious assumptions behind the position adopted by those who advocate individualised, enquiry-based, competence-oriented programmes of education. The most common explanation of communication failures is incorrect. People do not, on the whole, fail to communicate because they lack communication *skills*. They fail to communicate because they think that they have no *right* to say anything. Even if they did say something, they believe, they have no right to demand that those to whom they wish to say it should listen to them. Indeed, they believe that, even if they did express an opinion, those in authority would not, indeed should not, listen to them. Likewise, the belief that people not only can, but should, formulate and ask their own questions, be able to find their own answers to them, expect to be able to make those answers known, and expect notice to be taken of them, is not always widely accepted.

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Attention may also be drawn to the fact that, while, in the course of developing an effective communication designed to say something one wishes to say, one goes through several drafts, obtains feedback and suggestions from others, and rethinks and revises one's ideas, this process is very different from producing "fair copy" for no other purpose than that of satisfying teacher demands. In the latter process, the emphasis tends to be on neatness and tidiness for its own sake, and on conforming to a teacher-selected,

and teacher-specific, set of language conventions. A corollary of the former position is that, in the absence of formal standards, it is necessary for pupils to have a real audience, interested in the topic, and something which they themselves wish to say, both to establish a criterion of effective communication and to obtain feedback from the audience. The implicit assumption behind this view is that the child, and only the child, can study the communication process in which he is engaged, and work out for himself (not necessarily explicitly) ways in which to improve his methods through discussion with others. The pupil must be encouraged to go after half-formulated ideas, grasp them, articulate them, and express them in effective ways. In this way pupils will come to expect to clarify their ideas by expressing them. This is very different from the position most commonly advocated by teachers. This is that pupils should be clear about what they are going to say before they say anything. The position advocated here is that, *as a result of* speaking and writing, pupils will come to realise what it was that they wanted to say. As a result of using words they do not understand they will not only familiarise themselves with concepts, words and theories, they will actively contribute to the process whereby words are reinterpreted and given new and better meanings.

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observed was the use of language to analyse the effectiveness of a total communicative strategy – which aspects of the process were communicating what messages, which were failing, what were the barriers to more effective communication of information, ideas and feelings? And how could the audience be got into a more receptive frame of mind? Still less was language used to make explicit what it was that the gestures, gaze and posture of an audience have to tell one about the effectiveness of one's communicative strategies.

Another obvious use of language is to obtain information. But *which* information – information the teacher wants (and probably already has) or information which will enable one to lead one's own life more effectively? The latter is much more likely to lead one to develop effective information retrieval strategies. Was the information to be obtained from books, prised out of the heads of experts, members of the community, or generated anew from archaeological, social, political and scientific studies? Even in relation to books, little effort was usually made to develop effective retrieval skills – examining the structure for key phrases, skimming skills to locate relevant information, detailed reading and marking crucial passages on the books. The use of language to analyse effective information retrieval processes was conspicuous by its absence. Few teachers encouraged their pupils to develop the ability to hear what was not said – to read between the lines, to interpret innuendo, to note what was avoided, to "read" gestures and voice and gaze inflections, to examine unquestioned assumptions, to ignore that which was not relevant to their own purposes, to mull over the implications of what was said and to make explicit the cause of feelings of unease about it.

But besides communicating and retrieving *information*, and analysing the effectiveness of communication processes, language is used for a host of other purposes between people. It is used to *prevent* other people saying what they think and asking embarrassing questions. It is used to conceal feelings. It is used to persuade, cajole and bully others into complying with one's wishes. It is used to think about the talents of others and how to capitalise upon and develop those talents. It is used to articulate shared values and the means to be used to reach them. It is used to evade control. It is used to signify one's assent to values expressed in group meetings, to assent to group processes, and to endorse group feelings. All of these are uses of language which can be usefully practised by pupils in schools.

Use of Language for Psychological Purposes

We have mentioned the use of language to analyse the effectiveness of communication strategies, to think about the values, priorities and talents of colleagues and how they could be developed, utilised and rewarded – or cajoled into compliance with ones own purposes. But language is also used to bring to bear relevant past experiences, to reflect on the effectiveness of any one particular course of action, to anticipate obstacles in the future and seek ways round them, to think about one's feelings and emotions, and to think about one's *own* talents, strengths and priorities. It is used to give expression to one's feelings and ideas. It is used to think about group processes and how they can be influenced. It is used to think about, and make explicit, the shared values and "thought ways" of a society. It is used to make explicit how societies and organisations work and what can be done to influence them. Not only are concepts used to solve problems, language can be used to think about and make explicit the strategies to be used to evolve the concepts which are required to solve problems. It is used to make other people's concepts one's own, and, in the process, to transform those concepts. Through discussion one clarifies what it is that one thinks. All of these are activities which some teachers, using competence-oriented, project- and enquiry-based, educational activities grounded in the environment, not only lead pupils to do, but also to develop the meta-strategies they require to become better at doing.

It was originally intended to conclude this article by describing the activities of a number of teachers effectively pursuing some of these goals. In practice, it emerged that the accounts which could have been included would have been such a shallow selection from what was available that the best course of action seemed to be to refer interested readers to our forthcoming publication (Raven, Johnstone and Varley, 1985).

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