# In Search of Lost Language: A longitudinal study into trainee teacher motivation and the reactivation of lapsed language skills

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*Trainee language teachers require a high standard of subject knowledge for their intense training programme and frequently find it difficult to balance the need to maintain their language proficiency with the more urgent necessity of learning new professional skills. This longitudinal study explored language attrition and strategies that could be employed to reactivate lapsed language skills. An initial three year study was undertaken in the context of a Postgraduate Certificate in Education Modern Foreign Languages programme at a Welsh university with the aim of supporting subject knowledge, but the findings are relevant to the wider professional knowledge of new teachers. The initial case study phase lasted two years and many valuable data were gathered by means of questionnaires, interviews and reflective logs. This was followed by a one-year action research intervention which took the form of a subject knowledge consolidation programme, during which trainee teachers were able to put into practice strategies that would allow them to reactivate language skills that had suffered attrition over extended periods. Their progress was charted by language audits, reflective logs and focussed testing. The main finding was that effective reactivation required a combination of structural input and extensive exposure to the target language, though the latter could be undertaken by activities which could be integrated into students' daily leisure routine. In the following two years, the programme continued to develop and findings reveal that the success that students experienced in the process of reactivation shows a clear correlation with their motivation levels. This programme has not only supported students in the reactivation of lapsed language skills but also encouraged reflection on the process of metalearning, helping them to develop into more confident and competent teachers.*

*Keywords*: motivation, reactivation, attrition, knowlege, skills, reflection

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# 1 Introduction

Maintenance and consolidation of subject knowledge is a concern shared by teachers in all disciplines and at every stage of their career; or at least, if it is not, it should be, as adequate subject knowledge is an essential requirement for teaching. Many trainee teachers are anxious that their subject knowledge might not be equal to the task of imparting knowledge and skills to the learners in their charge, and many university tutors feel that the trainees are right to have such concerns and recognise that a proportion of new entrants to the profession do not possess adequate subject knowledge for the role they are to undertake. Modern foreign language (MFL) trainee teachers perhaps feel this anxiety more acutely than their fellow trainees from other disciplines, as language skills are on public display in the classroom and it is a relatively easy task for tutors and mentors (teachers responsible for managing training within the school) to identify trainees who fail to meet the linguistic requirements of their role. Many MFL trainees who join teacher training programmes come straight from university degree courses. Others, however, have spent some years away from their language studies (having perhaps brought up families or pursued other careers) and lack confidence and competence in their subject knowledge. Reactivating past language skills is therefore a worthwhile and attractive option for them. Even the trainees who have recently completed a language degree might be keen to reactivate another previously learned language as a way of improving their employability. Improvement of subject knowledge is therefore a key priority for trainee teachers.

In the United Kingdom, most trainee teachers undertake a one-year training programme, the Postgraduate Certificate of Education (PGCE) in order to qualify as teachers. This research study was undertaken in a Welsh university and initially comprised three cohorts of students (2006–2009). It began with a case study phase, lasting two years (2006-2008), and was followed by a one-year action research phase (2008-2009). The final two years of the project (2009-2011) can be designated as the developmental phase, where the findings of the study were refined and extended. It is this latter period of two years that is the focus of this article.

The aims of the study were to assist trainees to reactivate lapsed languages and to help them to manage their learning needs. An additional aim of the study was to assist trainees in developing their metacognitive skills and encouraging them to see themselves as lifelong learners. The focus of the study was therefore to explore language acquisition, attrition and reactivation. The following research questions provided a framework the project:

1. How best can students reactivate and recall previously learnt language skills?
2. Which type of language knowledge seems to be the most resistant to loss?
3. Which learning methods have allowed students to maximise their language memory over a significant period of time and how can these methods be adapted for future use?
4. What impact does a clearer understanding of this process have on student learning and how can this contribute to improved professional practice?

## 2   Theoretical context

### 2.1 Language learning and relearning

While learning styles and strategies have been regularly and intensively researched in recent years, language attrition is a relatively infrequent theme of current and recent research.  In the context of this study, lapsed language skills can be defined as a loss of proficiency due to decreased use during an unspecified period of time.  There is a dearth of research in second language attrition and most research tends to be concentrated in the attrition of first languages.  However, many useful parallels can be drawn and it is helpful to examine the wider theoretical concepts of language attrition.  In her studies in this domain, Hansen (2000) describes an initial learning plateau that resists attrition and her findings suggest that more proficient learners are less likely to suffer severe attrition. The regression hypothesis (Hansen 2001) proposes that language is lost in the reverse order in which it is acquired, which explains, in part, why the language first learned seems to resist attrition more effectively than later language. Moreover, Hansen (2001) is able to reassure learners with the suggestion that language, once learned, remains in our long term memories longer than would normally be expected. What does change, however, is the amount of time needed to retrieve it; language that seems lost remains in our memories but we need to find cues to retrieve it.  In the research of De Bot & Stoessel (2000) this hypothesis is supported by the concept of 'savings', where language that is relearned, when it is tested, achieves a higher success rate than completely new language, suggesting that 'lost' language leaves a residual trace. Although this research applies to first language speakers who have suffered attrition of their childhood language, it is possible that the phenomenon of savings could apply to second language speakers seeking to reactivate lapsed language skills in adulthood.  This is an especially welcome finding for the trainee teachers in this study, who, once they recognise the need for sound subject knowledge in order to develop into effective practitioners, are motivated to find ways of relearning language that they previously knew well.

### 2.2 Motivating students – the challenge

Links between motivation, success and failure in language learning are controversial.  Graham (2007) highlights the importance of *agency,* which defines the way that learners estimate their ability to complete a task.  When learners feel that a task is within their capability, they are likely to be far more motivated than the learners who face tasks that they feel are beyond them. *Instrumentality* is another feature of the process of motivation identified by Graham, who points out that it encompasses 'learners' perceptions of the relationship between the learning strategies they employ on tasks and learning outcomes' (Graham 2007: 82).

The trainees in this study were faced with tasks that were clearly within their capability, not least because the tasks were selected by the trainees themselves, allowing them to undertake activities that matched their level of competence. However, the problems faced by the trainees were not in the level of difficulties of the tasks themselves but in the way they were required to

integrate them into a busy professional training programme.  In brief, they felt they were too busy to work on their subject knowledge.

Attribution theory (Coleman et al. 2007) suggests that factors that affect success are divided into those that we can control and those that we cannot. It seems that the trainee teachers in this study were affected by the contextual factors of their learning environment and some of them estimated that the costs of participating in the learning programme outweighed the benefits and consequently decided to concentrate their efforts on other aspects of the training programme and hope that their subject knowledge would look after itself.

Dörnyei and Ushioda (2007) identify the role of self as being significant. The *ideal self* is the representation of our hopes and aspirations. The *ought-to-be self* is concerned with the attributes we ought to possess, a representation of someone else's sense of duty and responsibility. The trainee teachers in this study needed to find ways to balance their perceptions of themselves as learners (the *ideal self*) and their professional duties (the *ought-to-be self*).  The paradox lies in the fact that although they accepted the need to improve their subject knowledge to optimum levels, they were distracted by the very real need to develop effective professional skills. Once basic principles about how to reactivate lapsed languages had been established (Years 1 to 3), the subsequent two years of this study (Years 4 and 5) sought to build upon this knowledge and to find ways of motivating trainees into developing the requisite professional and linguistic skills.

## 3 Methodology

### 3.1  Case study (2 years)

In the context of this study, data were gathered from trainee MFL teachers over a two-year case study phase.  This period comprised two separate cohorts of trainee teachers, from which 22 volunteers participated in the project. Trainees were given the task of reactivating lapsed languages using any method that they chose.  This was followed up by discussions in a focus group, electronic logs, questionnaires and interviews. From these data sources, general principles about the efficiency of different methods, strategies and approaches were developed. These are outlined in Section 4 below.

### 3.2  Action research (1 year)

The case study phase provided a valuable insight into ways that a reactivation process could be undertaken. It was followed by a one-year action research phase and this provided the opportunity to put the principles into action within the confines of a new PGCE cohort.  The intervention comprised the following activities:

- Language audits to assess initial language levels;
- Language testing and re-testing to measure progress throughout the intervention;

- Language logs to record activities undertaken every week and reflection on how useful or interesting they had been;
- Language partners, usually native speakers
- Language awareness sessions, where methods of reactivation could be discussed and disseminated.

The progress of the intervention was monitored by interviews and questionnaires and the tests / re-tests provided more tangible evidence of how successful trainees had been in reactivating their skills and subject knowledge. Three different types of tests were used:

- Diagnostic grammar test (adapted from Richards & Roberts 2008). In this test, trainees had to select the correct response from multiple choice options. In addition, they had to reflect upon how they had made their choice (knowledge of rule, 'feel' for the language or a simple guess);
- Receptive vocabulary test (adapted from the X_Lex test, Meara and Milton, 2003). In this test, trainees had to identify real words from pseudowords. The method of attributing marks dissuades trainees from guessing their responses;
- Productive vocabulary test (adapted from Meara & Fitzpatrick 2000). In this test, trainees were given words in the target language and had to generate as many words associated with the target word as possible.
  (The tests used by the trainee teachers are available on http://repository.uwic.ac.uk/dspace/bitstream/10369/879/1/Jill%20Lle wellyn%20Williams.pdf )

The range of activities described above was developed into a subject knowledge consolidation programme, which was repeated in subsequent years. Progress was monitored and changes to the programme were made in order to refine learning outcomes.

## 3.3  Developmental stage (2 years)

The two years following the action research phase of the project (2009-2011) were marked by attempts to increase the participation rates of the trainee teacher cohorts in the reactivation process, the subject knowledge consolidation programme. As already stated, learning to become a teacher is, at times, a very challenging endeavour. Trainee teachers will tend to be most concerned with the day-to-day difficulties that they face, such as lesson preparation, delivering the curriculum and monitoring the effectiveness of their teaching and pupils' learning. They will tend to prioritise the need to learn how to manage a classroom of pupils who might be disengaged and even disruptive more highly than their own language skills. They are likely to be more concerned about devising learning activities that will motivate their pupils rather than consolidating their own subject knowledge. In such conditions, the trainee teachers in this study sometimes found it difficult to participate fully in the subject knowledge consolidation programme.

During this two year period, in order to ease the workload and increase the participation of the trainee teachers, the following changes were made to the programme:

- Language testing was reduced to one test, the receptive vocabulary test described above (based on the X_Lex test of Meara and Milton, 2003). It was decided that the grammar test, although a thorough test of subject knowledge in its original form (Richards & Roberts 2008), was too long to suit the purposes of the sessions. Neither was the productive vocabulary test (adapted from Meara & Fitzpatrick, 2000) used because assessment was most effectively carried out by native speakers (who can easily identify a wide range of vocabulary items) and the help of such assessors was not always available.

- The receptive vocabulary tests were undertaken in the first Language Awareness session and sealed in individual envelopes, bearing the name of each trainee. Trainees completed the re-test in the final Language Awareness session and then opened their individual envelope and marked both tests themselves. Results were therefore known only to the individual students. This alleviated anxiety for the students by ensuring that only they would be aware of the extent of their progress throughout the subject knowledge consolidation programme. Tutors felt that giving the trainees responsibility for their own progress would be a mark of their confidence in the developing professionalism of the trainees.

- All other features of the intervention remained part of the subject knowledge consolidation programme. However, the rate of reminders given by tutors was changed from weekly to monthly and finally to once each term, in order to attempt to increase participation rates.

## 4 Findings

Years 1 and 2 of the study comprised the Case Study phase of the project, where 22 volunteers contributed to the data gathering process that provided a body of knowledge about the process of language reactivation. From Year 3 onwards, there was an expectation that the whole cohort of PGCE MFL trainees would take part in the study. However, given their heavy training workload, it became a considerable challenge to ensure that all trainees participated fully in the process and many did not complete the subject knowledge consolidation programme. There was particular difficulty in enforcing participation as the subject consolidation programme, although an integrated part of the MFL training programme, did not have learning outcomes that contributed to the established assessment procedures of the PGCE programme. In order to qualify as teachers, the trainees have to complete assignments and meet the qualified teacher standards. Although tutors expected trainees to participate in the subject knowledge consolidation sessions and complete the language logs, these activities did not contribute to any formal assessment. Trainees understood this and this affected their engagement with the subject knowledge consolidation programme. Encouraging full participation in reactivation activities therefore became a considerable challenge for the tutors. Participation rates were as follows:

Year 3: Action Research phase (2008-2009):  41%
Year 4: Developmental phase Year 1 (2009-2010):  37%
Year 5: Developmental phase Year 2 (2010-2011): 58%

In Year 3, (2008-2009), trainee teachers were given weekly reminders to complete their activities and log them.  Some trainees reported that they found frequent reminders to be a source of anxiety and that it did not increase their motivation to remain within the study.  Consequently, in Year 4, (2009-2010) the trainees were reminded on a monthly basis.  This however did not improve participation rates, as can be seen above. In Year 5, (2010-2011), trainees were reminded only three times in their training year, yet the rate of participation improved considerably. It is difficult to draw any correlation between the frequency of reminders and the participation rates; the differences are therefore most likely to be linked to the differing personalities that made up each cohort.

Responses to the new arrangements for the testing were, however, more positive.  In the Action Research phase (Year 3), trainees demonstrated a high level of anxiety about their test results and the conclusions that tutors might draw from them.  As one of the central aims of this study was to develop trainees' intrinsic motivation, their desire to maintain their own subject knowledge and their growing professionalism, tutors felt that they had no need to see the test results, that trainees should keep the results to themselves and draw their own conclusions from any difference between their first and second attempts at the test.  Trainees appreciated the trust that the tutors had placed in them and their enjoyment of the test procedures increased significantly.  Rather than seeing the tests as an unwelcome task, they approached them with curiosity and interest.

Throughout the five years of the study, trainees were presented with the research questions in subject knowledge consolidation sessions and their views during these discussions added to the body of knowledge of each response:

1.  How best can students reactivate and recall previously learnt language skills?

The trainee teachers who took part in the case study and action research phases of the project reported a wide range of findings, based on their diverse learning experiences. However, they confirmed that basic structures resisted attrition more successfully. These findings were confirmed in the learning outcomes of the trainees in the developmental phases. In addition, they confirmed the view of the case study cohorts: that the most effective reactivation process combined two elements: exposure to the target language, in the form of reading, listening and target language contact, and structured input, such as learning vocabulary, completing grammatical exercises and the in-depth preparation they would need to carry out in order to prepare their lessons. Trainees frequently returned to well established learning strategies, as explained by one student:

I think that my methods chosen did help language reactivation. The simple act of reading and practising some grammar rules and topic-specific vocabulary was the best way for me to revive the skills. Although it sounds

simplistic in its approach, it was the best method for me, as this has always been one of my preferred reading styles.

Trainees found a 'bottom-up' approach to be very useful and discovered that tackling the most basic aspects of the language first not only consolidated the foundations of their subject knowledge but also increased their self-confidence, especially when they realised that they knew these areas of the language well. One trainee advised other learners:

> Basically, start right from the very basics again, so you have the foundations and the confidence to teach the simple stuff. Then gradually build up to a higher level. You can strengthen your language skills through various methods - writing to a penpal, surfing the net, reading magazines and book,/listening to music and watching satellite tv. I also found that observing German lessons at school really helped a lot.

> 2.  Which type of language knowledge seems to be the most resistant to loss?

The reactivation of spoken language provided some surprising findings and was a frequent topic of conversation in the language awareness sessions. Trainees often discussed their anxiety about displaying speaking skills in spontaneous situations in classroom contexts and worried that they would not be able to access key vocabulary from their long-term memories when required. However, they found that knowledge of links between graphemes and phonemes tended to resist attrition well and if they had developed a good understanding of the ways that certain words were pronounced, they tended to retain it. Interestingly, some trainees reported instances of having previously learned a language to the level of developing a regional accent, then finding that on reactivation, the local accent had been replaced by a standardised, national accent. This was confirmed by one of the tutors who recounted that, while living in France, her sons had developed regional accents. On their return to the UK, they gave up studying French but began to speak it again some years later, at which point their regional accents had been replaced by more standard French accents. In the case of the trainees, this change could be explained by the fact that the materials they used for reactivation would most probably have featured standardised accents. However, as the links between graphemes and phonemes revealed a strong audio memory, it is surprising that the regional accents did not resist attrition more effectively. This merits further research.

Many trainees demonstrated high levels of anxiety about the loss of language, such as one who observed:

> My feelings for my present level of language skills are the same as they usually are when I am living in the UK; which is to say that unless I am actually living in France or Italy I harbour a niggling anxiety regarding my language skills. Basically, I am concerned that vocabulary, accent and aural comprehension skills are in a constant state of decline. However, I should emphasize that this is not a new sensation, I tend to worry about these things any time when I am not immersed in a foreign language. I feel less anxiety about grammar skills, although I am acutely afraid of making errors

in the gender of French words.  I feel as if I have never learnt the gender of many simple French words and it seems late in the day to rectify such a huge gap.

Therefore, it can be concluded that although trainees need to reactivate lapsed language skills, in some cases the knowledge was not there in the beginning. Trainees found that their school placements provided excellent opportunities to identify those language items resistant to loss as well as those that they needed to reactivate.  One trainee pointed out:
I tend to never forget basic language (simple verbs/simple commands etc...) because I use it every day in school and also slang! (because I use this when I speak to my friends).
Consequently, it is most likely that regular language practice, particularly in the context of a classroom, reinforces language use and resists attrition.

3.  Which learning methods have allowed students to maximise their language memory over a significant period of time and how can these methods be adapted for future use?

In common with the case study trainees, the trainee teachers of the action research and developmental phases found that rote learning in their initial learning had been useful in rooting structures firmly in their memories but did not rate chunk memorisation highly as it impeded their understanding of language manipulation. One trainee explained the importance of understanding the complex relationship between different parts of speech and using this to develop pupils' knowledge of how language works:

I think vocab is my favourite element of a language and one that sticks with me the longest. I love breaking down words, looking inside them for other words to help you find the meaning and I think this definitely helps. I'm not sure who taught me this or when I learnt this though. I'm trying to teach my 6th formers to do it now and it helps me again.

The learning activities that they remembered well and valued highly tended to feature an element of developing learner autonomy, such as researching for a topic or preparation of a presentation. Trainees showed a high level of awareness of strategies that would work well for them:

Reading over simple vocabulary lists allowed me to recall the more simple and specific topic-based vocabulary. This should allow me to answer any questions that should come up during a lesson. However, as it has always been, if I do not know the word, or cannot give a synonym, then I would have to admit defeat and resort to the dictionary.

I suppose that my choice of methods was influenced by the fact that I know that this is how I learnt things best in the first place. By resorting to tried and tested methods, I am convinced that I will be able to learn as quickly, in order to avoid moments of embarrassment when the words that are being asked for escape me.

As tutors frequently pointed out to the trainees, they are good examples of effective language learners, as evidenced by their success in the progress they had already made in their studies.  The challenge for them would now be to make this knowledge explicit and to share it with their pupils in school.

4.  What impact does a clearer understanding of this process have on student learning and how can this contribute to improved professional practice?

The participants in the study benefitted from the activities that they undertook and reported increases in confidence and perceived competence. In addition, they developed an awareness of themselves as learners, an empathy with their pupils and an insight into the learning process that will be useful in their future careers.    Many reported that lesson preparation helped them to clarify their knowledge of language and to identify their learning needs.  Trainees tended to demonstrate a high level of self knowledge and a pragmatic approach to their learning, as shown by the advice offered by this trainee:

> I would advise them to think about what exactly their fears would be regarding their lapsed language skills, and to target them appropriately. Thankfully, we are at the age where we know how we learn things best, so by using whatever method works best for them, they can set about meeting the targets they set themselves as regards reviving parts of their language that may have slipped slightly. Obviously, this will alter with the skills that need improving: for example, why would people read things in order to improve their speaking skills? The methods chosen should be relevant to their required outcomes.

Throughout the five years of the study, findings were examined and discussed with each cohort of trainees, allowing a model of language reactivation to be developed.

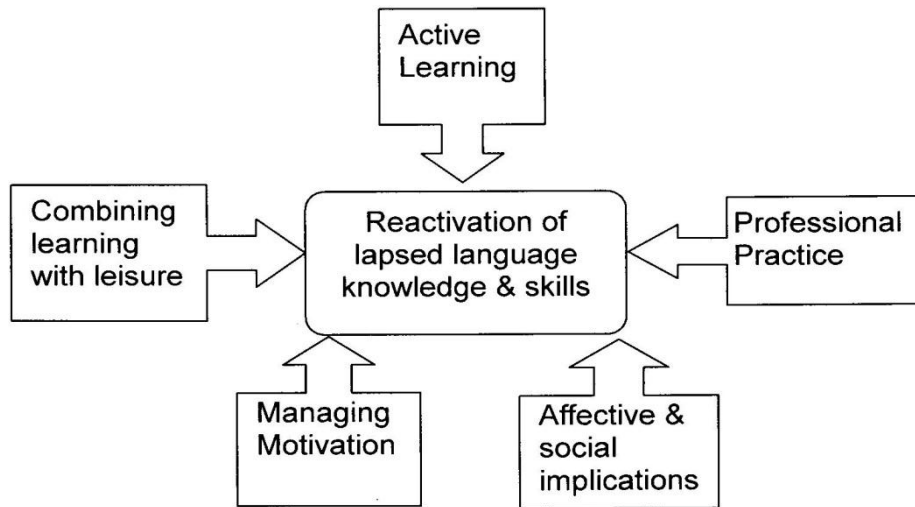The general principles are shown below in Figure 1.

**Figure 1.** Model for the Reactivation of Lapsed Languages (Llewellyn-Williams 2009: 182)

The trainee teachers found that learning was more effective if it encompassed a range of activities that encouraged **active learning.** These included both immersion activities and structured input, allowing the coverage of both productive and receptive skills.  Rote learning could be useful but chunk memorisation was not valued by students as it did not allow understanding of the constituent parts of language.  In reviewing their learning, they placed a premium on activities that enhanced their autonomy and gave them opportunities to manipulate language to suit their own linguistic needs.  The PGCE programme is intense and the workload is considerable, so the idea of **combining work with leisure** proved very attractive to the trainees.  They were inventive in their choice of activities, such as changing settings on their mobile phones, computers and other technological equipment to the target language.  Viewing television and films in the target language was a popular choice of activity and some even used target language recipes to prepare their evening meals. Others listened to music in their chosen language while some re-read favourite novels in the target language.  Students were therefore able to maximise the time they spent on the reactivation process while taking well-earned breaks from their studies.  **Professional practice** also provided many opportunities to hone their language skills and trainees reported significant language progress as a result of having to familiarise themselves with structures and vocabulary when preparing lessons for their placement schools.  Some trainees attended language lessons and evening classes to reinforce their own learning and discovered that the experience of being a learner increased their understanding of their own pupils' perspective and increased the empathy that they felt towards them. The **affective and social implications** of the process of reactivating language needed to be carefully managed by the trainees and the tutors. A positive feeling towards the target language culture provided a good support for the trainees and helped them to develop a robust attitude to the work required in remedying any of the shortcomings that they identified in their

subject knowledge. **Managing motivation** became of central importance to the study as the trainees were striving to improve essential skills while learning a new and very complex craft, that of teaching. They had to develop an accurate picture of the state of their subject knowledge and remedy any shortcomings in order to cope with the demand of their training. Conversely, it was also important for them to give themselves credit for what they did know and to celebrate their achievements and accomplishments.


## 5 Conclusion

Throughout this study, the importance of subject knowledge has been underlined and emphasised. It is the possession of skills and knowledge and the ability to share them with learners that underlies the function and role of the teaching profession. Where subject knowledge is deemed to be insufficient or faulty, no amount of teaching skill can compensate for this lack of proficiency and the learning of pupils is put at risk. The role of the teacher is that of an educator and as such, subject knowledge should lie at the heart of this function. However, teachers still need to keep a clearly defined sense of identity that is firmly rooted in seeing themselves as learners, particularly as subject knowledge is not finite or permanent. Learning should be a dynamic process and an acceptance that lifelong learning forms an essential part of teachers' professional experience should be accepted by all. Teaching and learning can be seen as two halves of the same whole and, as a consequence of this, reactivation of lapsed languages and maintenance of existing knowledge should form part of the modern language teacher's repertoire of skills.

   In future phases of this programme, a careful balance needs to be achieved between encouraging the trainees to become responsible for their own learning and to develop into truly autonomous professionals, while making sure that they receive adequate support and encouragement to cope with the rigours of the programme. As each trainee has widely differing needs and personal attributes, this is likely to be a complex challenge that will require careful reflection.

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