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## Factors Contributing to Positive and Negative Attitudes of Students towards the Learning of English Language in Junior High School

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### **Abstract:**

*This study examines the possible factors that contribute to the positive and negative attitudes of students towards the learning of English Language in some selected junior high schools in the Asante Akyem North District of the Ashanti Region. This study offers a broad overview of the field of individual differences in the teaching and learning of English language. All learners are endowed with different mindsets that they employ while performing various activities in their daily lives. Many teachers and researchers believe that learning preferences or learning styles can be used advantageously to enhance English language study and motivate students.*

*The objectives of this study were to investigate the attitude of students towards the study of English and the competence level of their English. The participants were interviewed and asked to complete questionnaires that would reveal their attitudes toward learning English.*

*The findings revealed that the students are dominant towards the learning of English; their levels of attitude are influenced by many factors such as lack of adequate and well-qualified English teachers, lack of need-based facilities, and social inadequacies.*

*The researchers provided recommendations for language teachers and other stakeholders to develop programmes that would encourage and motivate students in their learning of the English language.*

**Keywords:** Differences, language, strategy, teaching, learning, attitude, interest, instructional, temperament

### **1. Introduction**

It is now a widely accepted phenomenon that formal education is spreading in every part of the world. Every child has to learn to read and write. Formal education occupies a very important place in the life of every Ghanaian, especially every school-going child.

Despite the provision of some levels of logistic support, the provision of relevant teaching-learning materials, and efforts by teachers to enhance learning in basic schools, junior high schools, and senior high schools, the problem of poor performance in English language continues in both reading and writing at all levels (Witkan, 1976). We should not forget the fact that English language plays a very important role in the formal education of every child. It is the language of communication in the formal sector. It is the most basic element that learners need in the contemporary world to be able to study at the higher level of the educational ladder.

It is now a widely accepted statement that English has spread to become a world language or a global lingua franca. It occupies a very important place in the life of every Ghanaian. It is the medium of instruction in all educational institutions in the country.

English is considered a verbal work of arts and compositions with the primary function of being read. English language serves to provide an exquisite excitement of emotions and very deep insight into the nature of reality. It translates various life experiences into various patterns and thus helps readers discover meaning in their lives. It provides them with insight into dealing with the people and the world around them.

English language study creates a new world in addition to the already existing one and, thus, is distinguished from other writings. English language is a discipline or subject which studies imaginative sayings and writings of any group of people through the medium of English. It embraces the whole art of communication through words. It gives emotional as well as intellectual pleasure. English language is not a religious, moral, and political document but is concerned with morals, religions, and politics. Diyanni (2002) thinks that English language is a subject that transports us to the world that

creates imagination, evokes our emotions of love, sorrow, joy, and pity, and thus enhances our appreciation and understanding of life. English gives pleasure, elevates and transforms experience, and functions as a continuing criticism of values. The aesthetic delight of English language serves to purify emotions and morals and illumine the intellect. In other words, learning English gives knowledge and understanding. Thus, it is considered an important part of education in this contemporary world of ours.

For this very reason, Showalter (2004) observes that teaching English, for the educationist in the past and present, is considered a way of making people better human beings to fit into the society in which he/she belongs. English, therefore, enables us to recognize the best part of ourselves and motivates us to contribute positively in life and to our societies.

The question is, if English offers such a great opportunity for mankind, then why is it that some people see it differently? Does it mean some teachers handle the subject wrongly? Why do some students see it as a difficult subject, or were they born to dislike it? The field of education is constantly searching for techniques efficiently to select effective instructional strategies to differentiate instruction for students. Why do teachers select the types of instructions or strategies to promote the teaching and learning English in the classroom? Most teachers believe a mixture of educational goals, teachers' experience, research, student ability, aptitude, interest, and learning style intuitively guide their strategic selection process (Tomlinson, 2003). One possible theory is that teachers' personalities guide the intuition that selects instructional strategies. This study aims to determine if students' positive and negative attitude and interest significantly influence their instructional strategy in teaching and learning English. Significant effects between personality temperament and instructional strategy type selections were found, as well as differences in how teachers in junior high schools differentiate instruction(s).

English teachers frequently teach English to transcend human experiences and to encourage the rising above material circumstances. Canter and Long (1991) categorized the approaches to teaching English in academic settings as 'the cultural model,' 'the language model,' and 'the personal growth model.'

In Ghanaian junior high schools, English is taught mainly as a cultural model or as a combination of cultural and language models. Teaching methodology attempts to facilitate students to read about English rather than learn to read English language. Students are required to understand and collect information about the culture and ideologies invested in texts by their authors. In view of this, the essence of English language, which can best work to provide personal growth and help build up students' evaluative and creative abilities, is undervalued and neglected. The teaching of English has almost failed to develop a total response to literacy and academic work.

Teaching English at junior high schools is based on the historical-biographical and moral-philosophical approach. The former's approach to teaching English considers a literary work mainly a mirror of its author's life and age. This approach to teaching English makes English language a source of transmitting biographical, historical, and socio-political information and colonialism. The aspects of English are the orals/speech work, grammar, reading and comprehension, composition/essay writing, and literature. Each one has a different approach to handling. It is observed that all these approaches fail to enable students to relate English to their life to generate their own meanings and evaluate the given information.

The present research explores the strategies used in the thinking skills programmes and attempts to apply them to the teaching of English language. Modern research in educational psychology has proven that it is possible to improve human recognition, that is:

- The capacity to think creatively about challenges and opportunities,
- The ability to generate creative solutions and transform solutions into action, and
- The skills to process, synthesize and evaluate information

### 1.1. Problem Statement

The main focus of the study was to examine students' attitudes toward learning English.

- What is the level of attitudes of students towards learning English?
- What is the level of English competence of the students?

### 1.2. Purpose of the Study

The study aimed to examine students' attitudes and interest in learning English language and the level of English competence of the students in selected JHS in the Asante Akyem North District of the Ashanti Region.

A secondary purpose of the study was to use the results of the study as a basis and make appropriate recommendations for improvement.

### 1.3. Research Questions

The following are the research questions of the study:

- Do JHS students have attitudinal problems with learning English?
- What are the possible factors that positively or negatively affect JHS 1 students in learning English language?
- What is the level of English competence of the students?

### 1.4. Aims/Objectives of the Study

The study will be of immense benefit to the writers and students. Through the study, English language teachers will develop skills and learn modern methodologies for solving classroom problems that students encounter in teaching

and learning the subject. The study will provide information about the relevance of temperaments in learning English based on students' attitudes and interests and provide some practical guidelines to teachers so that they can prevent the poor attitude of some teachers and students towards the teaching and learning of English language.

## 2. Literature Review

Researchers have tried to identify the specific reasons why some students do not perform well in English. The more those researchers have realized how complex the situation is, the more they have concluded that it is more important for every school-going child to learn a second language; and the need to provide the necessary materials and designs and appropriate pedagogical methods for teaching and learning English. Nevertheless, many governments in less developed countries, like Ghana, lack the financial resources, administrative capacity, and/or political will to implement the legislation necessary to fulfill their educational mandates. As a result, a large proportion of children in the low-income sector of the country remain without access to basic education. Those who get the opportunity do not get the necessary support.

All learners are endowed with different mindsets that they employ while performing various activities in their daily lives. These learning styles or learner strategies are believed by language pedagogues to be essential in deciding the success or failure of language learning (Reid, 2002; Oxford, 1993; Decapua & Wintergerst, 2005). Working from the discipline of psychological education, Gardner proposed in the early 1980s the theory of multiple intelligence (MI) that all humans are born with a different set of intelligence and tend to excel in one area over another. It is not a simple descriptor of what we usually think of as a temperament trait in the sense of being primary concepts that condense challenges of the child's characteristic emotional patterns for parents and other caregivers, especially teachers.

Gardner (1983) suggests that with negative reactions to the new and only adaptability, very shy and even timid have difficulty in social interactions and turn down new responsibilities, especially if they have had many unpleasant and distressing experience situation when growing up. If, however, their temperament traits have been recognized and respected by parents and teachers and they have been allowed to adapt comfortably at their own pace, the story of adult life will be different. It needs to be stressed here that this study seeks more to aid English language teachers in finding out what influences whether a given attribute is regarded. The question is, is there any relevance of attitude and interest in teaching and learning of English language? (Golay, 1982).

### 2.1. What Is Learning?

The behaviour of people and animals is continually changing through the experience we have in the world. Learning is to modify one's behaviour. Learning is the acquisition of knowledge, facts, skills, attitudes, and others as one goes through a process of experience and can be retained and used when and where necessary.

Gordon (1989) states that learning is a relatively permanent change of behaviour in performance potential that arises from experience. Learning must be more or less permanent. The ability to perform always makes learning permanent. Nobody learns without experiencing through paying attention. It is through learning that man adapts to his environment. It can be more effective if one uses all five senses (tools). In learning, one acquires knowledge, skills, attitudes, beliefs, values, habits, etc. As time goes on, changes are set in through experiences. Significant learning takes place when the subject matter is perceived by the learner/student and participates responsibly in the learning process. The most socially useful learning in the modern world is the learning of the process of learning, a continuing openness to experience and incorporation into oneself of the process of change.

Researchers and practitioners use learning style research with personality and cognitive styles to determine ability, predict performance, and improve classroom teaching and learning (Reiff, 1992; Ehrman, 2001; Ehrman & Oxford, 1995). In recent years, the language-teaching profession has also embraced its interpretation of the multiple intelligences model (Gardner, 1983, 2000) as a learning style model for curriculum and materials development.

### 2.2. Learning Strategies

Learning styles and learning strategies are often seen as interrelated. Styles are manifested by learning strategies (overt learning behaviours/actions). A given learning strategy is considered neither good nor bad; it is essentially neutral until it is considered in context. A strategy is useful under these conditions:

- The strategy relates well to the L2 task at hand.
- The strategy fits the particular student's learning style preferences to one degree or another, and
- The student employs the strategy effectively and links it with other relevant strategies. Strategies that fulfill these conditions "make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations" (Oxford, 1990, p.8) and enable more independent, autonomous life-long learning (Allwright, 1990).

In subject areas outside L2, the use of learning strategies is demonstrably related to the student's achievement and proficiency (Pressley & Associates, 1990). Thus, it is not surprising that students who frequently employ learning strategies enjoy a high level of self-efficacy, i.e., a perception of being effective as a learner (Zimmerman & Martinez-Pons, 1986). Less able learners often use strategies in a random, unconnected, and uncontrolled manner (Abraham & Vann, 1987; O'Malley & Chamo, 1996), while more effective learners show carefully orchestrated, targeted strategies. There are so many learning strategies that various schemes have arisen for accounting for them. Among the relatively early taxonomies is that of Weinstein and her associates (Weinstein et al., 1988).

### 2.3. Integrating Learning of Styles and Multiple Intelligences

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, two great theories were put forward in an attempt to interpret human differences and design educational models around these differences.

Learning-style theory has its root in the psycho-analytic community; multiple intelligences theory is the fruit of cognitive science and reflects an effort to rethink the theory of measurable intelligence embodied in intelligence testing.

Both, in fact, combine insights from biography, anthropology, psychology, medical case studies, and an examination of art and culture. However, learning styles emphasize the different ways people think and feel as they solve problems, create products, and interact. The theory of multiple intelligences is an effort to understand how cultures and disciplines shape human potential. Though both theories claim that dominant ideologies of intelligence inhibit our understanding of human differences, learning styles are concerned with differences in the process of learning, whereas multiple intelligences center on the content and products of learning. Until now, neither theory has had much to do with the other.

### 2.4. English Language as a Subject

English language is a very versatile subject and is generally considered one of the most difficult subjects to teach. There is no right or wrong way to teach an English class. However, there is a smart way to teach it. The idea in it is to get not just an answer but a creative answer.

The study of English was not formalized as a discipline until the 1840s, when American universities established it as a field of study. As it is taught in universities, the definition of English has changed radically since the 1970s, now including more minorities, more women, and a wider range of texts. English departments have redefined how they define English in the last thirty (30) years. Hogins (1984); and Kennedy (1987) see English study as an academic discipline that includes the study of literature written in the English language.

More broadly, English studies explore the production of and analysis of texts created in English (or in areas of the world in which English is a common mode of communication).

### 2.5. Causes of Poor English Language Performances in Our Schools

A person's education is closely linked to his/her life chances and well-being (Battle and Levis 2002). Therefore, it is important to have a clear understanding of what benefits or hinderers of one's educational attainment.

There are several topical areas that are most commonly linked to academic performance, including student role performance (SRP) factors, school factors, family factors, and peer factors. Student role performance is how well an individual fulfills the role of a student in an educational setting. Sex, race, school effort, extra-curricular activities, deviance, and disabilities are all important influences on SRP and have been shown to affect test scores. School environment factors, such as school size, neighbourhood, and relationships between teachers and students, also influence scores (Crosnoe, Johnson, and Elder, 2004). One's family background has also been formed to influence a student's performance in English language.

### 2.6. The Level of English Competence of Students

According to Krashen's theory (1981), the attitudes of learners/students are not only the fundamental aspects of learning but also the support one gets from home, the influence of peer groups, classmates, and the entire society (Nysten, 2009). Attitudes of students are individually based due to individual differences and traits. There are other factors that contribute to the development of students' attitudes. The way instructors interact with students could establish a long-lasting relationship in the teaching and learning process. Attitudes toward learning are important factors in the learners' levels of goal setting, problem-solving abilities, beliefs, and the motivational process of learning and their academic performances.

Krashen claims that "learners with high motivation, self-confidence, a good self-image, a low level of anxiety and extroversion are better equipped in second language acquisition" (Krashen, 1987).

Low motivation, low self-esteem, anxiety, introversion, and inhibition can raise the effective filter and a 'mental block' that prevents comprehensible input from being used for acquisition. The extent of students' attitudes towards learning English was determined by descriptive analysis based on the total score of students' level of competence in learning English language to answer the Research Question 3 – What is the level of English competence of the students?

The sub-scales with group percentage scores above 60% were perceived students' attitudes toward learning English, while those of 50% or below were perceived to have moderate students' attitudes toward learning English. The students' attitudes and interests in learning English indicate their relationship between their competencies in the English language and other subjects.

## 3. Methodology

The study used a mixed method in gathering the data. A mixed method of research design is a procedure for collecting, analyzing, and design a procedure for collecting, analyzing, and mixing both quantitative and qualitative research methods in a single study to understand a research problem.

The study comprised fifteen junior high schools selected from Asante Akyem North District in the Ashanti Region of Ghana. This study was designed to recognize the potential factors that might impact students' attitudes toward learning English language at the junior secondary school level. The fifteen schools comprised seven from well-endowed schools and eight from less-endowed schools. They were categorized as 'A' for well-endowed and 'B' for less-endowed schools. The

sample size used in the study consisted of three hundred students, twenty from each of the fifteen selected schools, with ten males and ten females each.

Farming is the main economic activity in Agogo, contributing about 70% of the town's economic output. The pupils/students are often taken to the market or farm to assist their parents and hence absent themselves from school on such days, making the children in the community truant. Pupils/students do not also frequently hear English language and do not place much emphasis on good pronunciation for pupils/students to listen and learn from them. Much attention is not paid to children's education because the community in which the schools are located is a trading and farming one. So parents are not much concerned when their wards absent themselves from school, run from school, or perform poorly academically; even though the District is blessed with a university college, nursing training college, college of education, five senior high schools, about fifty-five junior high schools and eighty primary schools.

Ghanaian language is used in farming and trading activities, and since pupils/students see their uneducated parents and guardians using Ghanaian language (L1) as the medium of communication, they do not see the need to study the English language. Most of the parents and guardians are illiterate, and because of that, their children do not get the opportunity to listen, watch or see them reading, especially in English language, to motivate them. Since the study of English language is systematic, when a child absents him/herself from school for just a day, it affects him/herself from school for just a day; it affects him/her because what is taught in a day is not revisited but continued or built upon the next day.

### 3.1. Population

As already indicated, the population was the Form One students of the selected junior high schools in the Asante Akyem North District. The total population for the study was all the three hundred Form One students of junior high schools in the selected schools—twenty students from each school, with ten males and females each.

### 3.2. Research Instruments

The instruments used for collecting data were questionnaires, interviews, and observations of the students.

### 3.3. Questionnaire

A questionnaire is a list of questions or items used to gather data from respondents about their attitudes, experiences, or opinions. It can also be used to collect quantitative and/or qualitative information since our work was based on a mixed method. Questionnaire offers a fast, efficient, and inexpensive means of gathering large amounts of information from sizeable sample volumes. The students' questionnaires were made up of sixty-five (65) items which focused on their attitude towards the teaching and learning of English language and some benefits to being obtained in studying English language as Research Question 1 requires finding out the factors that affect their learning of English language in response to Research Question 2.

### 3.4. Interviews

An interview was employed to collect more information from the students. An interview is a process of communication or interaction in which the subject or interviewee gives the needed information verbally in a face-to-face situation. In a sense, it is an oral questionnaire. We used the interview as a tool to gather data required by the research. It was to find out whether the respondents' views expressed were consistent with their questionnaire responses and, finally, to assist in interpreting and explaining the findings using the interview data. It was a semi-structured type of interview. It formed the secondary data source to supplement the primary source, the questionnaire.

### 3.5. Observations

The observation was also employed to determine whether the expressed views of the respondents on both questionnaires and interviews were consistent with what the researchers observed. An observation is a process in which one or more persons observe some real-life situation process/event and record pertinent occurrences. It is used to evaluate the overt behaviour traits of the individual in controlled and uncontrolled situations. We used participant observation, whereby the class members actually participated in some of the activities of the lessons taught. We did that to record the facts we were looking for.

### 3.6. Data Analysis

The data gathered from students' attitudes and interests toward learning English were analyzed using quantitative and qualitative methods. The data gathered through questionnaires, interviews, and observation were analyzed in the form of frequency and percentage.

## 4. Findings and Discussion

The results of the three research questions are:

Issues/Factors	Well-endowed Schools	Less-endowed Schools
Factors	Lack of practice Lack of English teachers 46%	Lack of practice Lack of English teachers 54 %
Motivation	Instrumental 66% Integrative 40%	Instrumental 34% Integrative 60%
Course	Not effective 59% Very effective 56% Effective 42%	Not effective 41% Very effective 44% Effective 58%
Modern technology	Very essential 75% Essential 80%	Very essential 70% Essential 60%
Recommendations	Skilled teacher 57% Practice 44%	Practice 56% Skill teacher 43%
Government assistance	Appoint skilled teachers 50% Modern classrooms 40%	Appoint skilled teachers 50% Modern classrooms 60%
Required English Skills for English Teachers	To teach the easy way 59% Proper knowledge 42%	To teach the easy way 41% Proper knowledge 58%
Importance	Higher study 57% International language 50%	Higher study 43% Related to other subjects 50%
Environmental contribution	High 63% Medium 41% Less 44%	High 37% Medium 49% Less 56%
Study of English language compared with other subjects	Difficult 37% Necessary 31%	Easy 63% Interesting 69%
Learning hour	More than 2 hours 52%	Less than 2 hours 48%
English books	More than or equal to 5 (62%) Equal or less than 10 (42%) Equal or less than 15 (36%)	Less than or equal to 5 (38%) Equal or less than 10 (48%) Equal or less than 15 (64%)
Helping hand	Teacher 52% Parents 12% Brothers 12%	Teacher 55% Parents 38% Brothers 6%
Future plan	Doctors, Engineers, Teachers, etc. 60%	Those who do not know 40%
Participatory gain	Yes 67%	No 33%

Table 1: The Comparison of Students' Opinion

If we compare the study with other subjects, it is found out that it is difficult in the Asante Akyem North District in the Ashanti Region of Ghana. It means the existing curriculum of English is not suitable in both areas. This may be the probable cause of identifying the existing curriculum as less effective by most of the respondents in both areas.

The various statistics show the differences in both well-endowed and less-endowed schools. Students in well-endowed schools are found to devote more study hours to learning English compared to those in less-endowed schools. Remarkably, 52% of the students spent more than 2 hours studying English, while the ratio is only 48% in less-endowed schools. Despite the English achievement in both areas, the standard is still low in the District.

The main statistical analysis of the entire work upon which the major question of the Questionnaire was analyzed. It takes care of the mean, median, and standard deviation of the research works, as seen in table 2 below:

School	Gender		Age	District	Class	Number of Families
N valid	100	100	100	0	37	00
Missing	0	0	0	100	63	1
Mean	7.53	1.50	3.03		2.97	3.25
Median	7.00	1.50	3.00		3.00	3.00
Std. Deviation	4.352	0.503	0.171		0.164	0.941

Table 2: The Statistical Analysis of the Students' Questionnaire

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Strongly Disagree	10	10.0	10.1	10
Disagree	4	4.0	4.0	14.1
Neutral	5	5.0	5.1	19.2
Agree	21	21.0	21.2	40.2
Strongly agree	59	59.0	59.6	100.0
Total	99	99.0	100.0	
Missing System	1	1.0		
Total	100	100.0		

Table 3: The Use of Effective Method of Teaching English

Table 3 indicates respondents whose teachers use effective methods of teaching English. Those who strongly disagreed were 10, representing 10%, and those who strongly agreed were 59, representing 59.6%. The difference is 49.6%, indicating that the teachers have not been using an effective method of teaching English.

From the various statistical presentation analysis, it is true that students have different attitudes and interests toward learning English as an academic discipline.

The study was intended to find out whether students have interests and attitudes that influence their learning of English in the fifteen selected junior high schools in Asante Akyem North District of Ashanti Region of Ghana. The results showed that students' interests and attitudes toward learning English are the dominant factors in both areas. An average of 20 students from each school of the two categories was used.

It came out that there are a lot of factors that hinder students' interest in learning English. Among them are:

- Students were not introduced to English language very early.
- Students have limited vocabulary knowledge.
- Students' reading comprehension skills were undeveloped.
- The students have poor English backgrounds from primary schools.
- Teachers emphasize the teaching of grammar and give little attention to the other aspects of the English language.
- Students do not understand figurative language.
- Students have limited knowledge of lexis and structure.
- Students do not understand explicit and implicit information in reading comprehension, especially in literary texts.
- Students are not able to identify the main ideas in sentences or paragraphs of a passage.
- Students cannot re-state sentences in their own expressions.

## 5. Conclusion

The discussions so far have revealed some important reasons why there is a need to emphasize the teaching and learning of English language in junior high schools in the country and in Asante Akyem North District in particular. For addressing the specific research questions, one important finding in the study is that students' English achievement is mainly affected by the teachers' factors in both category 'A' and category 'B' schools. The second significant finding is that students' English achievement is better in well-endowed schools. The study also revealed that students learning English at the junior high school level showed more dependency on the textbook. The textbook, in response, was not found very interesting to the students, especially with inadequate textbooks. However, the students showed a driving force to acquire knowledge of English. They were interested in learning new things from teachers and their peers in the classroom. It also revealed that most of the students in both areas had a positive tendency to seek help from their parents, teachers, peers, private teachers, and senior students towards academic activities and to improve upon their English achievements. It is heartening to note that a range of activities can ensure learners' involvement in their English education; make a class interactive and enjoyable. At the same time, we also need to take the initiative for the improvement of slow learners and irregular students in English learning.

In fact, the findings of the study would have to be articulated to judge the effective domains of English education to the policymakers, educationists, curriculum developers, and researchers.

## 6. Recommendations

There is a need to propose tentative solutions to identified problems. It is, therefore, recommended that:

- The curriculum developers for English language for junior high schools and colleges of education must include intensive reading and writing activities in the curriculum. The teachers/instructors of English language in the country's junior high schools and colleges of education must commit themselves to the strategies outlined in the curriculum for the teaching of reading and writing,
- Teachers should expose their students to passages or texts with backgrounds which are quite familiar to them and the language level not too difficult for the standard and comprehension of the students and all the aspects of English based on Gardner's multiple intelligence,
- Teachers must endeavour to mark students' exercises as early as possible and also provide the necessary feedback. Even if a teacher cannot discuss students' mistakes with them in the classroom, he/she must provide clear comments under each answer that has any problem or is perceived as wrong or not answered well. These comments would serve as a guide to the students not to commit such mistakes again,
- Finally, junior high schools must have good libraries stocked with various books to enable students to exercise extensive and intensive reading for pleasure and improve their language generally. All the necessary English language materials (books) must be provided. It should not be forgotten that a lot of English language teachers/facilitators should be trained in the country to enable junior high schools to get qualified English teachers to handle the students.

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