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Bridging the Gaps: Multimodal Theme-Sets in the Global Composition Classroom

As international student enrollment increases on college campuses across the US, the landscape of the composition classroom is among the first to observe the shift in the student demographic. Though some international students benefit from developmental English and ESL initiatives, most will eventually experience the mainstream writing classroom. With inclusion, the linguistic divides between international students, native speakers, and course texts are exacerbated, and it is on the instructor to find ways to provide universal access to course material and engage students in an equitable manner. This pilot study examines the viability of multimodal theme-sets as a means of bridging the literacy and cultural divides that often subjugate international students within the mainstream composition classroom. This quasi-experimental study examines 2 linguistically diverse, mainstream writing classrooms with significant L2 international student enrollment to identify how multimodal theme-sets can more effectively engage students across existing cultural and literacy barriers.

Introduction

Student demographics in the first-year composition classroom are changing. Instructors across the US, even among the least diverse campuses, have observed increased enrollment of L2 international students. Since 2005, international student enrollment at colleges and universities in the US has increased by 30%, with many institutions reporting record enrollment every year since 2007 (Institute of International Education, 2012). While some of these students will likely benefit from remedial ESL programs and special sections of

first-year composition that cater specifically to incoming international students, most will eventually enroll in mainstream composition classrooms despite growing protests from faculty (Ruecker, 2011). Writing classrooms have gone global so expeditiously that many instructors are left without the training necessary to fully integrate these linguistically diverse students into a cohesive classroom community. This leaves many instructors with the problem of bridging literacies in a way that makes information equally accessible to all students. By exploring the potential of multimodal theme-sets, this article seeks to build the case for scaffolding course material in a manner that reiterates core concepts textually, visually, and aurally for students. Through a comparative analysis of two courses, it will explore how this technique can narrow the gap that exists between native and nonnative English speakers, fostering classroom community in a campaign for mutual growth.

For the past decade, there has been a great deal of conversation regarding the importance of multimodalities in the field of composition. It is largely accepted now that the term *multimodal* refers to the hybrid texts that function in the digital world, using multiple sensory stimuli to convey a message to a particular audience. According to Hocks (2003), digital media require “a complex relationship between verbal and visual meanings . . . these [media] and the literacies they require are hybrid forms” (p. 630). The digital age, by nature, complicates the definition of writing. Those writing for digital environments are often required to incorporate audio or visual components to web texts or blogs to communicate more effectively with a particular audience. While writers still use textual components (i.e., written alphabetic language), these components are often insufficient to meet the needs of a 21st-century audience.

As texts become more dynamic, varied approaches to composition instruction are vital, according to scholars such as McComiskey and Selfe. McComiskey (2000) explains that “excessive attention to just one level . . . gives students a limited, unbalanced, and, I believe, inaccurate view of how writing works” (p. 11). For McComiskey, introducing students to a variety of rhetorical situations is vital to holistic writing instruction. In many ways, digital media create unique rhetorical situations that transcend the parameters established by traditional printed texts. Moreover, if students are expected to compose digital texts outside of the classroom, it stands to reason that these texts should be equally incorporated pedagogically. This position is echoed by Takayoshi and Selfe (2007), who observe that traditional content of the writing classroom has become irrelevant to many students as emphasis is too often placed on formal alphabetic writing and

print media, while students increasingly “[exchange] texts composed of still and moving images, animations, sounds, words, and colors” (p. 2). In short, composition instructors must make an effort to update content in global composition classrooms to make writing relevant to all students who are preparing to write for the current digital age.

While some literacy gaps exist between L2 and native English-speaking students—linguistic, technological, or otherwise—it becomes increasingly important to introduce course content that can be universally accessible for all students, content that is capable of bridging those divides. Incorporating multimodal theme-sets embraces McComiskey’s call for varied pedagogical strategies while recognizing the importance of modalities in writing instruction. Incorporating a variety of texts and media is vital to this process and offers many advantages. As explained by Richison, Hernandez, and Carter (2006), incorporating a variety of texts that communicate using language in different ways allows

students to learn to use multiple genres to fill in gaps in their knowledge and get a more complete picture of any particular phenomenon. Reading across genres and media expands and strengthens their grasp of what is important . . . [and] helps develop thinking strategies to deal with both concrete and abstract problems. (p. 2)

Simply put, all native English-speaking students do not read at the same grade level, nor do they harbor the same interests or experiences. These differences between individual students can be even more pronounced with the inclusion of L2 international students. Thus, assigning excerpts from a common reader or core textbook alone leaves the text largely inaccessible for students who lack certain linguistic or contextual experience. One way of engaging students with course content in a meaningful way is through the incorporation of multimodal theme-sets that bridge texts with student experience.

Multimodal theme-sets are essentially a collection of readings that are thematically linked to a common core text and may comprise anything from children’s books and novellas to video clips and interactive games (Richison, Hernandez, & Carter, 2006). Commonalities between these texts allow students to make connections that ultimately reinforce key concepts from the primary reading. For example, an instructor may teach a lesson on logical fallacies, for which the core text is the introductory chapter of Gary Goshgarian’s *Exploring Language* (2013). This chapter discusses critical-reading and thinking strategies for students, including an important discussion of common

logical fallacies. However, many L2 students may struggle to access and apply the reading during class discussions, as it does include challenging vocabulary and introduces brand-new concepts. To help compensate, the instructor may construct a theme-set that includes a web text from *Writing Commons*, an article from the *Purdue OWL*, and brief video clips from *YouTube* (see Table 1). Presenting supplemental resources alongside the primary text serves to clarify and reinforce information for students, thus narrowing the gap between L2 students and the traditional course readings.

Table 1
Logical Fallacy Example Theme-Set

Primary/Core Text	Textual
Goshgarian, G. (2013). Introduction: Reading and thinking critically. In <i>Exploring language</i> (13th ed.; pp. 1-34). Boston, MA: Pearson	
Supplemental Web Texts	Textual/Visual
McIntyre, M., & McKee, J. (n.d.). Logical fallacies. <i>Writing commons</i> . Retrieved from http://writingcommons.org/open-text/information-literacy/rhetorical-analysis/logical-fallacies	
Purdue University. (2013). Logical fallacies. <i>Online writing lab</i> . Retrieved from https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/659/03/	
Supplemental Videos	Visual/Aural
McRae, M., & Hutson, J. (2011). Critical thinking playlist. <i>YouTube</i> . Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iSZ3BUru59A&list=PLKCy4138lUoNp7kztKVmXpgoJXjVacqr-	

Student motivation is imperative to the successful implementation of multimodal theme-sets. Selecting resources to which students can relate could potentially motivate them to read the assignment and make the lesson more relevant. When working with L2 students, it is important to include resources that appeal cross-culturally. For example, readings that reflect only Western rhetorical ideals can alienate students who may be more familiar with communication strategies in their home cultures. Presenting texts that reflect the demographics and psychographics of the various cultures that comprise each class is a simple way to ensure that students can make a personal connection. Furthermore, including popular media resources, such as *YouTube*, presents content on the students' terms. After all, regardless of stu-

dents' national origin, web-based resources are a common denominator for most L2 and native English-speaking audiences.

Research Context

Data for this study were compiled during the spring of 2014 at a midsized, public four-year university in the American Midwest. This university is not as ethnically diverse as other campuses in the region (84% Caucasian/L1 English speakers), but international student recruitment has noticeably expanded in recent years. Moreover, with few ESL writing courses offered, most students with a TOEFL score of at least 61 are quickly enrolled into mainstream composition courses. This blend of demographics and policies created an environment that was conducive to this pilot study.

Research Questions

While multimodal theme-sets provide an option to engage students more effectively in the writing classroom, this article sought to identify the benefits of incorporating multimodal theme-sets in a mainstream composition classroom with significant L2 international student enrollment. Through cross-case analysis of two first-year composition courses, this article asked whether multimodal theme-sets would provide an effective means of bridging linguistic gaps that exist between L2 and native English speakers, as well as literacy divides that exist between students and course content. To address this overarching question, this article seeks to address the following secondary questions:

- Do multimodal theme-sets promote increased student engagement with assigned readings?
- Can multimodal theme-sets foster cohesive discussions with L2 and native-speaking students?
- How effective are multimodal theme-sets at bridging the literacy and linguistic divide between L2 and native-speaking students, as well as with the course texts?

Targeted areas of analysis included overall comprehension of unit content, evidence of applied knowledge, and course completion rates for L2 students.

Research Methods

This inquiry took the form of a comparative analysis between two first-year composition courses with significant L2 international student enrollment. Course A was the control group, and it required

students to read only the required course texts assigned for each unit throughout the term. Course B, on the other hand, required students to read course texts assigned for the term, but these texts were presented alongside multimodal theme-sets that were centered on the same topics discussed in the course reading. Required core texts were the same for both courses and the incorporated theme-sets were highly reiterative, presenting the same information to students through *YouTube* videos, vlogs, podcasts, short essays, and web texts.

The two sampled courses had relatively high L2 international student enrollment. Total enrollment for both courses was capped at 25 students, with the control group containing nine L2 international students, while the theme-set course included 10 (see Table 2). In each class, three countries were represented. Course A contained students from Saudi Arabia, Hong Kong, and China, while Course B contained students from Saudi Arabia, China, and Nigeria.

Table 2
Nonnative and Native English Speaker Distribution
in Sampled Courses

<i>Student enrollment demographic</i>	<i>Course A (control)</i>	<i>Course B (theme-set inclusion)</i>
Nonnative English speakers	10	9
Native English speakers	15	16
Total students	25	25

Two assessment tools informed this inquiry:

1. Student surveys conducted at the end of each unit; and
2. A portfolio assessment tool used by many first-year writing programs to evaluate overall student performance in the course.

In addition to these methods, observations were also conducted to observe levels of student engagement during small-group and whole-class discussions in the class period following the assigned readings.

Unit surveys were distributed online (via the course-delivery system) and were to be completed by students before the class in which the readings would be discussed. A mixed-method survey allowed students to respond initially to multiple-choice questions to identify core concepts, and they also had one long-answer question that re-

quired them to define and discuss terminology and apply this information to upcoming projects. The quantitative multiple-choice questions provided statistical data to easily establish correlations and the qualitative narrative prompt provided additional insights to support those initial findings.

After students completed the unit surveys, each class conducted small-group discussions of core content. Informal observations of these small groups, as well as the whole-class discussion that followed, provided a key opportunity to see how well the content of the readings resonated with students. This was largely done to verify correlations identified in the surveys.

Portfolios that were assessed contained samples of course projects, which included revised drafts of two major projects and a self-assessment essay. Portfolios were submitted at the end of the term. These projects were then evaluated through the course objectives outlined on the syllabus and scored as exceptional, proficient, or deficient. This process enabled the researcher to identify potential correlations between the integration of multimodal theme-sets and overall course performance.

As with any qualitative study, the findings of this inquiry are not generalizable. The conclusions drawn at the end of this article are representative of only the sampled students in these specific classroom contexts. However, correlations identified by this study provide important insights into the viability of multimodal theme-sets to improve student engagement in the context of the multicultural writing classroom. It will also provide a foundation upon which future studies can build to refine the picture further.

Results

While the small sample size was certainly a concern for this particular study, several interesting correlations emerged between the integration of multimodal theme-sets and L2 student engagement in this particular globalized writing classroom. Getting students to connect with course texts in a meaningful way is a challenge faced by every writing instructor. This challenge is often compounded with increased linguistic diversity among students. When the findings of the control were compared with those of the test group, interesting patterns soon emerged.

Survey Results

The initial data source included a series of three surveys following the introductory readings of the main units of course work, which provided an overview of literacy narratives, persuasive essays,

and genre analysis. While reviewing the initial findings of the control group's surveys, it quickly became apparent that student motivation to read the assigned texts was a significant concern. The first survey was completed by only 14 of the 25 students who were enrolled in the class, a completion rate of 56%. Though completion rates improved slightly on the second and third surveys (16 and 19 respectively), none of the surveys were completed by all students. Of the 10 L2 international students in the control group, just seven completed all three surveys, with the same three students abstaining from all survey participation.

Responses also demonstrated that even those students who completed the surveys failed to grasp many of the principles that were introduced by the readings. Of all responses submitted by students in the control group, 56% of all multiple-choice responses were correct, with correct response rates of L2 and native English speakers at approximately 49% and 61%, respectively. Though final averages indicated a significant gap in reading comprehension between native-speaking and L2 students, the response rates on the first two surveys were relatively even. The only significant difference between these groups occurred in the third unit survey, when the L2 students' correct response rate was approximately 57%, while native speakers scored just over 86%.

On the other hand, engagement with the assigned material increased significantly with the theme-set group. Participation in the unit surveys was relatively consistent, with 22 students participating in the first survey, 20 participating in the Unit 2 survey, and 21 participating in Unit 3. Of the 10 L2 students enrolled in this course, 10 participated in the first survey, while eight participated in the surveys for Units 2 and 3.

While participation remained relatively constant in the theme-set group, the rate of correct responses was significantly improved when compared to the control group. Of all L2 student responses to the three unit surveys, 87% were correct, demonstrating a significant improvement when student response rates were compared to those of the control group. Similarly, the correct response rate of native English speakers also improved to nearly 76% overall (see Figure 1, next page). One observation worth noting is that the overall performance of L2 international students on the surveys eclipsed the performance of even the native speakers in the classroom.

Observations

For the purposes of this project, the instructor made casual observations as he circulated around the room to listen to small-group discussions. These discussions were semistructured, as the instruc-

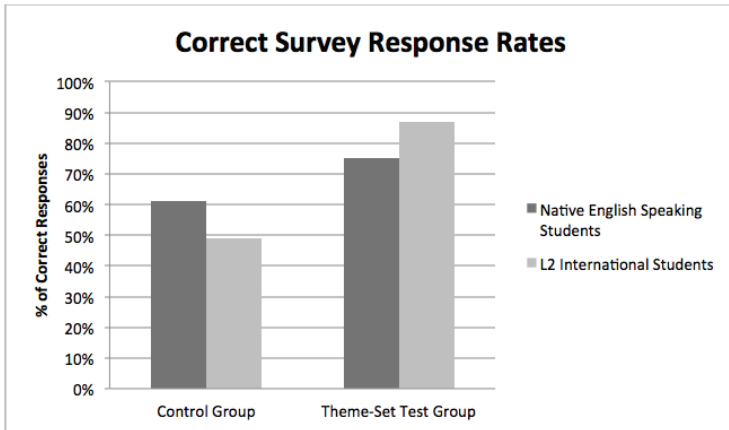


Figure 1. Above is a representation of the correct response rates on unit surveys by both the control and test groups.

tor directed students to form groups of four to six students that must contain at least two L2 international students and two native English speakers.

In the control group, many of the students struggled to discuss topics raised by the readings. During each observation, at least one member from each group (and an entire group during the first observation) admitted to ignoring the reading altogether. Still more students admitted to “skimming” parts of the assigned text, while one student outlined each chapter, writing down boldfaced section headings but without actually detailing the content contained by each section. As these small-group discussions transitioned to include the entire class, large periods of silence ensued. In an effort to stimulate discussion during the second observation, the instructor played a clip from one of the theme-set videos for the control group, which did ultimately stimulate some conversation.

In the test group, several students in each small group admitted to not reading the assigned course text; however, many watched the *YouTube* videos and admitted perusing the visual web-texts that were provided as part of the theme-sets. However, at the same time, much of the small-group discussion was centered on these visually appealing, engaging, multimodal texts, while the supplemental PDF essays and primary text were largely ignored in this small-group setting. After transitioning to the full-class discussion, several of the L2 students referred to the primary course texts during each of the discussions (after some initial prompting by the instructor). Even in these instances, the primary text served as a footnote as the student-centered

conversations quickly reverted back to the multimodal, new-media texts and videos.

Final Assessment

While comprehending core concepts is important to any class, applying that comprehension can be somewhat difficult. For a final assessment tool, every student in both the control and test groups was required to submit a portfolio of revised work from throughout the term. Each of these portfolios was evaluated by the instructor according to three categories. Portfolios receiving a score of “exceptional” must have demonstrated a mastery of grammar, spelling, and punctuation, as well as an applied knowledge of rhetorical principles that dictated audience and genre awareness, among the many other core concepts presented throughout the term, with only minor concerns. Those scored “proficient” must demonstrate applied knowledge of grammatical and rhetorical principles, with some minor and moderate concerns apparent in the sampled texts. Finally, portfolios scored as “deficient” either demonstrated little to no applied knowledge of grammatical and rhetorical principles, or were incomplete, as some students failed to submit all documents required by assignment.

In the control group, the majority of students (both L2 and native English speakers) scored in the proficient category, though levels of proficiency did vary. In all, four students (two international and two native speakers) scored “deficient,” though for different reasons. In this case, the two native English speakers had submitted incomplete portfolios, which included partial drafts and missing assignments. In the case of the nonnative speakers, one student committed an act of plagiarism, submitting an article from a popular blog online instead of his or her original work. Only one student portfolio was scored as “deficient” because of excessive grammatical errors or failure to apply rhetorical principles from class. In this case, nearly every paragraph of every text exhibited a significant number of grammatical errors and lacked organization, causing many of the documents to be largely incomprehensible. One characteristic worth noting is that this particular student was not a degree-seeking student at the university, but was rather participating in a one-semester student-exchange program (see Figure 2, next page).

The final assessment for the test group was interesting for a few reasons. First, the number of students scoring “deficient” was comparable to the control group, as were the reasons for that score (see Figure 3, next page). The one native English speaker who was scored “deficient” submitted an incomplete portfolio that was missing one assignment, while the remaining materials lacked key components.

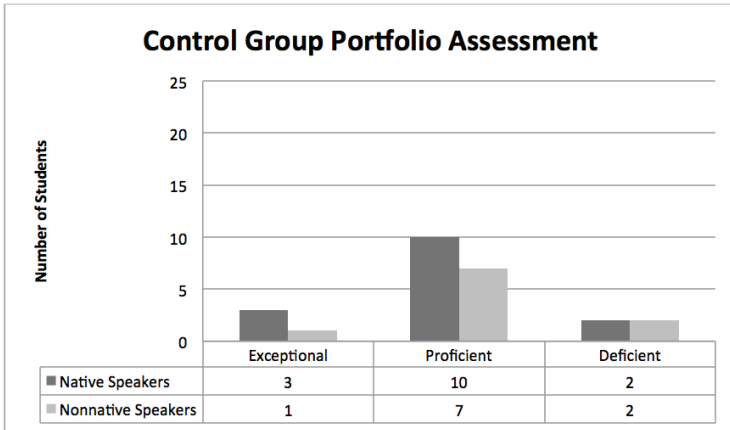


Figure 2. Final assessment scores for the control group.

Again, two international students were scored as “deficient” for plagiarism and for significant issues with organization of content, demonstration of basic rhetorical principles, and grammar. However, while the number of portfolios scored “deficient” was comparable (four in the control versus three in the test group), several more students scored “exceptional.” While just four students (three native speakers and one nonnative speaker) scored “exceptional” in the control group, 12 students in the test group achieved an exceptional rating (seven native speakers, and five nonnative speakers).

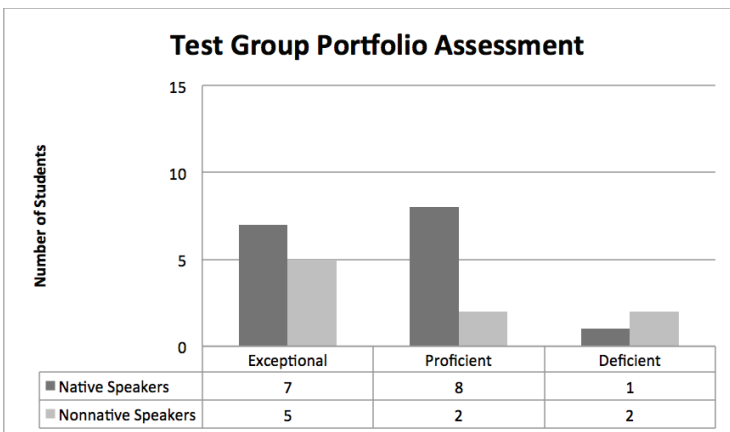


Figure 3. Final assessment scores for the test group.

Benefits of Multimodal Theme-Sets

It appears that incorporating multimodal theme-sets in the test group bridged literacy and linguistic gaps that existed between native and nonnative students, and with assigned readings. The results from the surveys indicated that students were more easily able to identify core concepts introduced in the assigned reading, while observations demonstrated more in-depth conversations between students than those of the control group. Moreover, the final assessment indicated that more students in the test group (both native and nonnative speakers) scored “exceptional” during the end-of-term assessment, suggesting that students who accessed course content through theme-sets were better positioned to apply that information in their own writing.

Challenges Raised by Multimodal Theme-Sets

While theme-sets appeared to encourage L2 students to more actively read the assigned course texts, the tendency of native speakers to ignore the primary text seemed to persist. Though it is true that unit surveys indicated a higher reader-comprehension level for native speakers, as well as nonnative, the average score of L2 international students surpassed those of the native speakers. Observations revealed that many native speakers skimmed the supplemental web texts and viewed some of the videos intended to supplement the primary reading assignment, but they did not complete the initial reading assignment. However, most international students read the primary text in addition to viewing these supplemental materials, which is the likely cause of their overall correct response rate in the unit surveys surpassing that of their native English-speaking peers.

Discussion

The ultimate goal of this inquiry was to identify the potential benefits of incorporating multimodal theme-sets into the multicultural classroom. Three basic research questions governed this pursuit.

Do multimodal theme-sets promote increased student engagement with assigned readings? This question brought mixed results. While theme-sets did seem to encourage L2 international students to engage more thoroughly with the primary text, theme-sets did not appear to yield the same results with native speakers. However, theme-sets did allow students in both demographics to engage with core concepts that were to be introduced by the core reading assignment.

How effective are multimodal theme-sets in creating a sense of community between L2 and native-speaking students? Overall, theme-sets did seem to stimulate more active conversation and de-

bate in the test group than the assigned reading in the control course. In both the control and test courses, small-group discussions were the initial means of unpacking assigned readings and each small discussion group included at least two students from each demographic. Discussions in the control group were labor intensive and often punctuated by long periods of silence. Conversations appeared to end quickly, and when transitioning to the whole-class discussion, most of the conversation was coming from the instructor and native-speaking students. In contrast, small-group discussions in the theme-set course appeared to be more focused and more engaging. Students in the small groups seemed to focus on examples raised by the supplemental texts and often used this content as a means of connecting content with broader examples from their personal experiences. When transitioning to whole-class discussions, contributions from students seemed more balanced, as L2 international students were more willing to offer their own perspectives. The overall effect was that conversations, both in small groups and in the whole class, appeared to take the shape of a multicultural discussion in the test group, while the control group seemed to marginalize L2 students in much more significant ways.

To what extent can multimodal theme-sets bridge the literacy and linguistic divide between L2 and native-speaking students, as well as with the course texts? Comprehension of core concepts for all students improved considerably with the introduction of multimodal theme-sets, though the most striking difference occurred with L2 international students. In the control group, native speakers outperformed nonnative speakers on the unit surveys, as well as on the final assessment at the end of the term. However, in the theme-set course, L2 international students outperformed their native-speaking peers on two of the three unit surveys, and they scored comparably on the end-of-term portfolio assessment. Based on these findings, it is clear that multimodal theme-sets, in this case, significantly narrowed literacy and linguistic gaps between L2 and native-speaking students and improved overall comprehension of assigned course texts.

Implications for Future Research

While these findings are not generalizable beyond the context of this inquiry, the findings from this project suggest that multimodal theme-sets can have a very positive impact on a multicultural composition classroom, and I believe this warrants additional exploration. A more extensive study into the viability of multimodal theme-sets in the field of composition does appear necessary. This study could later be expanded to other academic disciplines. Moreover, some ex-

perimentation into theme-setting strategies could provide additional insights into how to maximize the impact of these pedagogical tools for future students in inclusive, globalized classrooms.

Conclusion

In short, as international student enrollment continues to increase on college campuses across the US, composition classrooms will be increasingly globalized. As these cases present themselves, it is vital for writing instructors to present content to their students in a manner that bridges cultural and linguistic divides, making access to information equitable for all students. While additional research into this topic is necessary, multimodal theme-sets did seem to promote understanding of core content in this case, while also providing key insights into how that information may be put into practice by linguistically diverse writing students. Theme-sets can break down the boundaries that exist between L2 international students, their course texts, and native English-speaking peers that they will no doubt encounter in mainstream composition classrooms. Moreover, presenting information in a variety of modes also seems to promote student engagement with course material and intercultural exchanges, even if students still fail to connect with the primary course text.

Author

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