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Implications of Multiple Dictionary Meanings of Adjectives on Reading Comprehension of ESL Learners: A Study Conducted at BS Level in Rahim Yar Khan

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates how multiple dictionary meanings of English adjectives affect BS-level ESL learners' reading of academic texts in Pakistan. In classes where English is used for study, students often attach a familiar everyday sense to an adjective even when the paragraph signals a different meaning, which weakens comprehension. The study examines how learners decide on adjective meanings while reading whether they rely on context, dictionaries, or both, and which approach supports clearer reading. A quantitative survey was conducted with 300 BS students from three institutes in Rahim Yar Khan. A 30-item Likert-scale questionnaire recorded reading habits, strategy order, adjective confusions, and confidence in understanding. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages). Results show that most students combine context clues with dictionary consultation, but the sequence matters. Learners who first read the sentence and paragraph and then confirm their guess in a learner's dictionary report fewer wrong choices and less disruption to reading flow than those who start from dictionary entries. Confusion is greatest where everyday meanings clash with academic or technical uses and with stance-setting adjectives such as "negligible" effect or "robust" method. The study recommends training students to "infer from context, then verify in the dictionary," using example lines and frequent adjective–noun collocations, so that they move beyond one-meaning-per-word habits toward more flexible, context-based understanding.

| **KEYWORDS** | Polysemy, Adjectival Meaning, Reading Comprehension, ESL Learners, Contextual Vocabulary Acquisition, Dictionary Use, Pakistani Undergraduate |

Introduction

In higher education, reading academic texts is one of the main channels through which ESL learners encounter new vocabulary, disciplinary concepts, and evaluative language. Adjectives carry a heavy semantic workload in such texts: they signal stance, qualification, intensity, and limitation (for example, critical period, marginal improvement, robust findings). When these adjectives are polysemous, the same spelling may cover several distinct senses, which can easily mislead learners who rely only on a single memorised gloss.

Pakistani BS-level students typically study in a multilingual environment where English co-exists with Urdu and local languages and where past-paper culture emphasises compressed, rhetorically dense passages. In this ecology, students often depend on dictionaries or one-word Urdu equivalents to handle unfamiliar adjectives, even when the surrounding context points towards a different, more specialised sense.

Wrong-sense choices can quietly distort comprehension of an entire paragraph or exam item.

The present study focuses on how BS English learners in Rahim Yar Khan deal with multiple dictionary meanings of adjectives during reading. It contrasts dictionary-oriented and context-oriented strategies, and examines how far students report difficulty with polysemous adjectives in real academic texts. By concentrating on adjectives rather than general vocabulary, the study highlights a specific but high-impact area of lexical processing that has received relatively little attention in local research.

The main objective is to investigate whether learners who rely primarily on dictionary meanings experience more comprehension problems than those who begin with contextual inference and use dictionaries only to confirm their guesses. The article reports questionnaire findings on ten key items (Q1–Q10) that tap frequency of dictionary use, reliance on context, perceived effectiveness of context-based learning, and self-reported difficulty with multi-sense adjectives.

Literature Review

Vocabulary knowledge is a strong predictor of reading comprehension, and depth of knowledge is especially important for polysemous adjectives whose meanings shift with context (Nation, 2001; Qian, 2002; Schmitt, 2008). In academic prose, adjectives compress evaluation, stance, and technical distinctions (e.g., *significant limitation, marginal improvement*), so misinterpreting them can distort a writer's argument or the reported strength of evidence (Grabe & Stoller, 2011; Nelson & Stage, 2007). For ESL learners, controlling multiple meanings, collocations, and semantic prosody is therefore central to successful reading comprehension.

Within this broader view, meaning is not treated as a fixed dictionary entry but as something that emerges from use in context. Nouraldeen (2015) argues that meaning and context are mutually defining: readers cannot interpret meaning without context, and context is only established as readers construct meaning from linguistic and situational cues. For words with multiple dictionary senses, especially adjectives, this interdependence means that learners must integrate surrounding co-text, discourse function, and genre conventions to select an appropriate sense rather than relying on a single memorised gloss.

Contextual Vocabulary Acquisition (CVA) describes the process of inferring word meaning from co-text and prior knowledge when external aids such as dictionaries or teachers are not immediately available (Rapaport, 2005). In CVA, readers generate a meaning hypothesis from contrast, exemplification, apposition, or cause effect relations in the text, test that hypothesis against later sentences, and revise it as necessary (Nassaji, 2006). Because learners actively reason about sense rather than receiving it ready-made, CVA is associated with deeper integration of new vocabulary and better long-term retention than purely definitional learning (Rapaport, 2005).

However, not all contexts are equally helpful. Nelson and Stage (2007) show that contextually based multiple-meaning instruction, in which each sense is presented in a clear, supportive sentence, significantly improves both vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension, particularly for students with weaker initial vocabularies. Zarfsaz and Yeganehpour (2021) similarly report that high-information contexts and repeated encounters produce stronger gains in receptive and productive vocabulary

knowledge, whereas minimal contexts lead to weaker learning and poorer retention. These results suggest that adjectives with multiple meanings should be taught through rich, contrastive examples rather than isolated definitions.

A complementary line of work focuses on explicit training in context clues as a strategy. Studies with school-age learners indicate that when teachers model how to use definition, synonym/antonym, contrast, example, and summary clues, students become more accurate at inferring meaning and more confident as independent readers (Bishop, Reyes, & Pflaum, 2006). In a Nigerian ESL context, Shehu (2021) found that students taught with systematic context-clue instruction significantly outperformed peers taught using traditional vocabulary methods, with visual clues particularly effective. These findings support classroom routines that require learners to justify which textual signals they used to interpret unfamiliar adjectives.

Despite the advantages of context, dictionaries remain an important resource for disambiguating multiple meanings. Nist and Olejnik (1995) showed that the *quality* of dictionary definitions strongly predicts how deeply college students learn new words: adequate, clear definitions lead to better performance on several measures of word knowledge than vague or partial ones. Hamilton (2012) similarly found that multimedia and bilingual dictionaries can support immediate recall of new vocabulary, particularly when learners attend to example sentences rather than only the first sense listed. Research on multiple-meaning instruction suggests that guiding students to read beyond the first sense, notice usage labels, and compare dictionary collocations with the noun an adjective modifies can reduce misinterpretation (Nelson & Stage, 2007).

The rapid spread of electronic and pop-up dictionaries has changed how learners consult reference tools while reading. Mekheimer (2018) compared pop-up, type-in, and print dictionaries and found that all three supported reading comprehension and incidental vocabulary learning, with a slight advantage in speed and learner preference for pop-up tools. At the same time, learner logs suggest that the convenience of e-dictionaries can encourage shallow processing, first-sense selection, and neglect of examples (Hamilton, 2012). Effective instruction therefore needs to harness the efficiency of digital tools while still requiring learners to check collocations, examples, and genre-appropriate senses.

In the Pakistani context, vocabulary teaching has often prioritised grammar and translation over depth of lexical knowledge, and dictionary consultation is frequently treated as the default solution whenever a difficult word appears (Bhatti, Butt, & Khanam, 2019). Their experimental study with BS-level learners showed that a group taught through Contextual Vocabulary Acquisition outperformed a dictionary-only group on vocabulary development, highlighting the benefits of context-rich practice in this setting. At the same time, Pakistan's multilingual ecology, widespread English–Urdu code-mixing, and unequal access to English-medium schooling shape learners' default sense preferences and strategy habits, especially for common adjectives whose meanings have drifted in local usage (e.g., *decent* ≈ "respectable", *smart* ≈ "presentable") (Abbas & Iqbal, 2018; Ehsan & Aziz, 2014). These sociolinguistic factors may encourage dictionary-first habits or reinforce non-academic prototypes that interfere with selecting appropriate academic senses.

Taken together, prior research indicates that vocabulary depth and control over multiple meanings are crucial for reading comprehension, rich contexts and explicit context-clue training support accurate sense selection and retention, and dictionaries can

either aid or hinder learning depending on how strategically they are used (Hamilton, 2012; Mekheimer, 2018; Nelson & Stage, 2007; Nist & Olejnik, 1995; Zarfsaz & Yeganehpour, 2021).

However, there is still little adjective-focused evidence from Pakistani higher education, and few studies have profiled BS-level learners' strategy orientations dictionary-led, context-led, or hybrid when reading adjectives with several dictionary meanings (Bhatti et al., 2019). The present study addresses this gap by examining BS English learners' self-reported strategies for interpreting such adjectives, their perceived difficulties with perceived versus actual meanings, and the extent to which they rely on an infer-then-verify sequence in which context-based guessing is followed by selective dictionary checking during academic reading.

Materials and Methods

This investigation adopted a cross-sectional, quantitative analytic design. A self-developed questionnaire was used to elicit BS-level learners' reported strategies for interpreting adjectives with multiple dictionary meanings and their perceived difficulties in reading. The instrument consisted of 30 Likert-scale items rated on a five-point scale from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree and was informed by earlier research contrasting contextual and dictionary-based vocabulary learning.

Data were collected from three higher-education institutions located in Rahim Yar Khan: The Islamia University of Bahawalpur (Sub-Campus Rahim Yar Khan), Khawaja Fareed University of Engineering and Information Technology, and Government Postgraduate College for Women, Rahim Yar Khan. A total of 300 questionnaires were distributed among BS English students across these campuses; 226 usable responses were obtained after data cleaning, yielding a response rate of approximately 75%. This sample represents BS-level Pakistani ESL learners enrolled in English departments at public sector institutions.

Convenience sampling was used because intact classes were accessible and institutional permission was available. Participation was voluntary and anonymous; no grades or incentives were linked to participation. Inclusion criteria required active enrolment in BS English and the ability to complete the questionnaire in English, while incomplete or duplicate responses were excluded from the final dataset.

The instrument covered four main constructs: dictionary-oriented strategy use, context-oriented strategy use, perceived difficulty with adjective polysemy, and beliefs about retention. Items Q1–Q10 focused especially on how often learners used dictionaries or context clues, whether they found context-based learning more effective than dictionary learning, and whether they struggled with adjectives that have more than one meaning. Responses were coded numerically from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree), reversing negatively worded items where required so that higher scores represented stronger endorsement of the construct.

Questionnaires were administered during class hours with prior permission from course instructors. The researcher introduced the purpose of the study, clarified that participation was voluntary, and assured students that their responses would remain confidential. Completed paper forms were collected immediately in the classroom, stored securely, and later entered into SPSS for analysis. Ethical considerations included informed consent, anonymity, and the reporting of results only in aggregated form.

Results and Discussion

Completed questionnaires were screened for missing or inconsistent responses, and 226 valid cases were entered into SPSS and Excel for analysis. Descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, and cumulative percentages) were generated for all 30 five-point Likert-scale items; in this article, item-wise results for Q1–Q10 are reported through tables and brief narrative interpretations. Reliability of the questionnaire was examined using Cronbach's alpha, which indicated acceptable internal consistency for the scale. Graphs and cross-tabulations by institution (IUB RYK, KFUEIT, and GPCW RYK) were also inspected to explore patterns in learners' dictionary-led, context-led, and hybrid strategy orientations, but only the main trends relevant to adjective processing are discussed here.

Table 1
Dictionary use while reading English texts across institutes

Sr. No.	INSTITUTES	Frequency/Percentage									
		Agree (A)		Strongly Agree (SA)		Neutral (N)		Disagree (DA)		Strongly Disagree (SDA)	
		F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
1	IUB RYK	84	59.6%	25	17.7%	20	14.2%	9	6.4%	3	2.1%
2	KFUEIT	29	47.5%	18	29.5%	11	18.0%	3	4.9%	0	0.0%
3	GPCW RYK	34	54.8%	18	29.0%	9	14.5%	0	0.0%	1	1.6%
4	Total	147	55.7%	61	23.1%	40	15.2%	12	4.5%	4	1.5%

Overall, 78.8% of respondents agreed/strongly agreed that they use a dictionary while reading English texts, showing dictionary consultation is a common habit. Agreement was highest at GPCW RYK (83.8%) and similar at IUB RYK (77.3%) and KFUEIT (77.0%). Only 6.0% disagreed overall.

Table 2
Guessing word meaning from context while reading across institutes

Sr. No.	INSTITUTES	Frequency/Percentage									
		Agree (A)		Strongly Agree (SA)		Neutral (N)		Disagree (DA)		Strongly Disagree (SDA)	
		F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
1	IUB RYK	55	39.0%	61	43.3%	18	12.8%	5	3.5%	2	1.4%
2	KFUEIT	21	34.4%	20	32.8%	18	29.5%	2	3.3%	0	0.0%
3	GPCW RYK	12	19.4%	18	29.0%	30	48.4%	2	3.2%	0	0.0%
4	Total	88	33.3%	99	37.5%	66	25.0%	9	3.4%	2	0.8%

In total, 70.8% agreed/strongly agreed that they guess meaning from context, indicating many learners do attempt contextual inference. This tendency was strongest at IUB RYK (82.3%), moderate at KFUEIT (67.2%), and weaker at GPCW RYK (48.4%), where neutrality was comparatively high.

Table 3
Ease of understanding adjectives using a dictionary across institutes

Sr. No.	INSTITUTES	Frequency/Percentage									
		Agree (A)		Strongly Agree (SA)		Neutral (N)		Disagree (DA)		Strongly Disagree (SDA)	
		F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
1	IUB RYK	55	39.3%	38	27.1%	37	26.4%	8	5.7%	2	1.4%
2	KFUEIT	26	42.6%	20	32.8%	11	18.0%	0	0.0%	4	6.6%
3	GPCW RYK	22	34.9%	9	14.3%	20	31.7%	11	17.5%	1	1.6%

4	Total	103	39.0%	67	25.4%	68	25.8%	19	7.2%	7	2.7%

Overall, 64.4% agreed/strongly agreed that dictionaries make adjective meanings easier, while 25.8% remained neutral. Agreement was highest at KFUEIT (75.4%), followed by IUB RYK (66.4%), and lower at GPCW RYK (49.2%), suggesting varied perceived usefulness across institutes.

Table 4
Ease of understanding adjectives using context clues across institutes

Sr. No.	INSTITUTES	Frequency/Percentage									
		Agree (A)		Strongly Agree (SA)		Neutral (N)		Disagree (DA)		Strongly Disagree (SDA)	
		F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
1	IUB RYK	46	32.9%	46	32.9%	37	26.4%	9	6.4%	2	1.4%
2	KFUEIT	16	26.2%	15	24.6%	22	36.1%	3	4.9%	5	8.2%
3	GPCW RYK	13	20.6%	10	15.9%	24	38.1%	7	11.1%	9	14.3%
4	Total	75	28.4%	71	26.9%	83	31.4%	19	7.2%	16	6.1%

A combined 55.3% agreed/strongly agreed that context clues help them understand adjectives, but a large group stayed neutral (31.4%), showing uncertainty about this strategy. Agreement was strongest at IUB RYK (65.8%), moderate at KFUEIT (50.8%), and lowest at GPCW RYK (36.5%).

Table 5
Understanding adjectives without using a dictionary across institutes

Sr. No.	INSTITUTES	Frequency/Percentage									
		Agree (A)		Strongly Agree (SA)		Neutral (N)		Disagree (DA)		Strongly Disagree (SDA)	
		F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
1	IUB RYK	59	42.1%	31	22.1%	31	22.1%	11	7.9%	8	5.7%
2	KFUEIT	27	44.3%	14	23.0%	15	24.6%	2	3.3%	3	4.9%
3	GPCW RYK	18	29.0%	9	14.5%	20	32.3%	6	9.7%	9	14.5%
4	Total	104	39.5%	54	20.5%	66	25.1%	19	7.2%	20	7.6%

In total, 60.0% agreed/strongly agreed that they can understand adjectives without a dictionary, though 25.1% were neutral and 14.8% disagreed/strongly disagreed. Agreement was notably lower at GPCW RYK (43.5%) than at IUB RYK (64.2%) and KFUEIT (67.3%).

Table 6
Preference for dictionary use when adjective meaning is unclear across institutes

Sr. No.	INSTITUTES	Frequency/Percentage									
		Agree (A)		Strongly Agree (SA)		Neutral (N)		Disagree (DA)		Strongly Disagree (SDA)	
		F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
1	IUB RYK	53	37.6%	47	33.3%	24	17.0%	13	9.2%	4	2.8%
2	KFUEIT	18	30.0%	14	23.3%	19	31.7%	7	11.7%	2	3.3%
3	GPCW RYK	15	24.2%	12	19.4%	16	25.8%	8	12.9%	11	17.7%
4	Total	86	32.7%	73	27.8%	59	22.4%	28	10.6%	17	6.5%

Overall, 60.5% agreed/strongly agreed that they prefer dictionary use when meanings are unclear, indicating a verification habit in uncertain contexts. Preference was strongest at IUB RYK (70.9%), moderate at KFUEIT (53.3%), and lower at GPCW RYK (43.6%).

Table 7
Preference for digital/online dictionaries over printed dictionaries across institutes

Sr. No.	INSTITUTES	Frequency/Percentage									
		Agree (A)		Strongly Agree (SA)		Neutral (N)		Disagree (DA)		Strongly Disagree (SDA)	
		F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
1	IUB RYK	40	28.8%	52	37.4%	34	24.5%	8	5.8%	5	3.6%
2	KFUEIT	23	37.7%	13	21.3%	16	26.2%	6	9.8%	3	4.9%
3	GPCW RYK	16	26.7%	6	10.0%	16	26.7%	11	18.3%	11	18.3%
4	Total	79	30.4%	71	27.3%	66	25.4%	25	9.6%	19	7.3%

A total of 57.7% agreed/strongly agreed that they mostly use digital dictionaries, showing that e-dictionaries are the dominant tool for many learners. This pattern was strongest at IUB RYK (66.2%) and KFUEIT (59.0%), while GPCW RYK (36.7%) showed lower agreement and higher disagreement.

Table 8
Perceived usefulness of guessing from context vs. dictionary definitions across institutes

Sr. No.	INSTITUTES	Frequency/Percentage									
		Agree (A)		Strongly Agree (SA)		Neutral (N)		Disagree (DA)		Strongly Disagree (SDA)	
		F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
1	IUB RYK	37	26.6%	55	39.6%	25	18.0%	17	12.2%	5	3.6%
2	KFUEIT	18	29.5%	11	18.0%	19	31.1%	8	13.1%	5	8.2%
3	GPCW RYK	21	33.9%	11	17.7%	10	16.1%	11	17.7%	9	14.5%
4	Total	76	29.0%	77	29.4%	54	20.6%	36	13.7%	19	7.3%

Overall, 58.4% agreed/strongly agreed that contextual guessing is more helpful than dictionary definitions, though 21.0% disagreed/strongly disagreed, showing mixed preferences. Agreement was highest at IUB RYK (66.2%), but lower at KFUEIT (47.5%) and GPCW RYK (51.6%).

Table 9
Belief that context-based learning is more effective than dictionary learning for adjectives

Sr. No.	INSTITUTES	Frequency/Percentage									
		Agree (A)		Strongly Agree (SA)		Neutral (N)		Disagree (DA)		Strongly Disagree (SDA)	
		F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
1	IUB RYK	61	43.3%	37	26.2%	27	19.1%	9	6.4%	7	5.0%
2	KFUEIT	17	27.9%	18	29.5%	20	32.8%	4	6.6%	2	3.3%
3	GPCW RYK	13	20.6%	12	19.0%	13	20.6%	17	27.0%	8	12.7%
4	Total	91	34.3%	67	25.3%	60	22.6%	30	11.3%	17	6.4%

In total, 59.6% agreed/strongly agreed that context-based learning is more effective, while 22.6% were neutral. Support was strongest at IUB RYK (69.5%), moderate at KFUEIT (57.4%), and weaker at GPCW RYK (39.6%), suggesting differences in strategy confidence.

Table 10
Reported difficulty with adjectives that have more than one meaning across institutes

Sr. No.	INSTITUTES	Frequency/Percentage									
		Agree (A)		Strongly Agree (SA)		Neutral (N)		Disagree (DA)		Strongly Disagree (SDA)	
		F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
1	IUB RYK	42	29.8%	40	28.4%	31	22.0%	23	16.3%	5	3.5%
2	KFUEIT	15	24.6%	18	29.5%	15	24.6%	7	11.5%	6	9.8%
3	GPCW RYK	20	32.3%	13	21.0%	21	33.9%	4	6.5%	4	6.5%
4	Total	77	29.2%	71	26.9%	67	25.4%	34	12.9%	15	5.7%

Overall, 56.1% agreed/strongly agreed that they struggle with multiple-meaning adjectives, confirming polysemy as a substantial barrier. Neutral responses were also high (25.4%), implying uncertainty in meaning selection. Agreement was similar across institutes (about 53–58%), suggesting this difficulty is widespread.

Discussion

The results indicate that dictionary consultation is a dominant habit among BS-level ESL learners in Rahim Yar Khan. Most respondents reported using a dictionary while reading English texts (55.7% agree; 23.1% strongly agree), suggesting that definitions remain the main support in academic reading. This reliance is strengthened by frequent use of digital/mobile dictionaries (30.4% agree; 27.3% strongly agree), which speeds up lookup but may encourage quick, surface-level meaning choice. Overall, dictionaries appear to be used mainly to remove immediate uncertainty rather than to verify the most context-appropriate sense.

At the same time, learners are not purely dictionary-dependent. Many reported guessing meanings from context (33.3% agree; 37.5% strongly agree) and a sizable proportion believed context-based learning is more effective for adjectives (34.3% agree; 25.3% strongly agree). However, difficulty with polysemous adjectives remains high, as over half indicated they struggle with adjectives that have more than one meaning (29.2% agree; 26.9% strongly agree). This suggests that the main challenge is not access to meanings but selecting the correct sense in context, especially when the first or familiar dictionary meaning conflicts with the text.

Conclusion

This study shows that the main obstacle Pakistani BS-level ESL learners face with adjectives is not access to a dictionary, but choosing the context-licensed sense amid multiple dictionary meanings. The most successful readers in our data compute meaning from co-text first tracking contrast, example, and author stance and then confirm with a short, example-led gloss. This finding aligns with current evidence that richer contexts and contextual clue training deepen word knowledge and support comprehension, while low-friction e-dictionary support protects reading flow. In Pakistan's exam-oriented setting, where adjectives routinely carry evaluative, metaphorical and abstract senses, depth of knowledge for a compact set of high-utility adjectives is the lever that moves comprehension. The practical path forward is clear: teach for contexed polysemy, normalize a short inference routine, design example-forward glossing, and align assessments with evidence-based sense selection. Doing so will help learners read more

accurately and confidently not only on past papers and high-stakes exams, but in the academic reading that anchors their degrees.

Recommendations

On the basis of these findings, the study recommends that reading instruction for BS-level ESL learners should foreground context-first strategies. Teachers can model an infer-then-verify routine in which students read the surrounding paragraph carefully, attend to contrast and example cues, and check the noun that the adjective modifies before consulting a dictionary. Dictionaries should then be used to confirm or refine a context-based guess rather than to supply an isolated meaning.

Teachers are encouraged to give explicit attention to high-risk polysemous adjectives that frequently appear in academic and examination texts, such as critical, significant, marginal, nominal, and sound. Short, context-rich mini-lessons that highlight typical collocations (for example, significant difference, critical value, marginal improvement) can help students move beyond everyday or Urdu-influenced prototypes and choose senses that fit disciplinary usage.

In vocabulary teaching, reliance on single-word Urdu translations should be reduced. Instead, example-based glosses and brief bilingual explanations that keep the original collocation intact can better support meaning construction. When digital dictionaries are used, teachers should encourage students to read example sentences and labels rather than clicking quickly on the first listed sense.

Finally, curriculum planners and material writers can integrate adjective-focused tasks into BS-level reading courses and exam preparation materials. Worked examples of how to unpack adjectives in past-paper passages, short corpus-based lists of frequent academic adjectives, and low-stakes practice activities that require learners to justify their sense choices can all contribute to more accurate reading and deeper vocabulary knowledge.

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