

Content teaching & literature in the Mexican EFL context: Sandra Cisneros's *Woman Hollering Creek*

La instrucción basada en contenidos y la literatura en el contexto mexicano: Woman Hollering Creek de Sandra Cisneros

ABSTRACT: Learners' first-language knowledge, experiences, and histories should be at the forefront of foreign-language teaching. This can be achieved through adopting *Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL)*, which combines literature as content and reader involvement as language development. To enact such an approach, the 'practical criticism' model allows learners to engage in a reflective appreciation of literature that comes from themselves rather than from external literary experts. Focusing on the Mexican English-language learning context, this article examines how Sandra Cisneros's short story, *Woman Hollering Creek*, can help learners to develop an appreciation of literature and increase their own understanding of language use. The purpose of this article is to offer a CLIL teaching-learning framework that enhances an appreciation of Chicano literature, which emerges from the learners themselves, and promotes cultural awareness as well as language sensitivity.

KEYWORDS: Literature; Teaching English as a Foreign language; Content and Language Integrated Learning; Practical criticism.

RESUMEN: El conocimiento, las experiencias y las historias de los estudiantes en su lengua materna deben estar en el centro de la enseñanza de lenguas extranjeras. Esto se puede lograr mediante la adopción del enfoque de Aprendizaje Integrado de Contenidos y Lenguas en inglés, *Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL)*, que combina la literatura como contenido con la participación del lector en el desarrollo del lenguaje. Para llevar a cabo este enfoque, el modelo "crítica práctica" permite a los estudiantes adoptar una perspectiva reflexiva para apreciar la literatura, partiendo de sus propias interpretaciones en lugar de depender de expertos literarios externos. En el contexto del aprendizaje del inglés

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<https://doi.org/10.32870/vel.vi27.366>

Recibido: 31/01/2025

Aceptado: 29/04/2025

Publicado: 01/01/2026

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VERBUM ET LINGUA

NÚM. 27

ENERO / JULIO 2026

ISSN 2007-7319

E366

COMO CITAR: Mugford, G., & Rosales Covarrubias, K. M. (2026). Content teaching & literature in the Mexican EFL context: Sandra Cisneros's *Woman Hollering Creek*. *Verbum et Lingua*, 27, 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.32870/vel.vi26.366>

en México, este artículo analiza cómo el cuento *Woman Hollering Creek*, de Sandra Cisneros, puede ayudar a los estudiantes a desarrollar una apreciación de la literatura y a profundizar en su comprensión del uso del lenguaje. Por lo tanto, proponemos un marco de enseñanza y aprendizaje que combina la literatura CLIL y la crítica práctica..

PALABRAS CLAVE: Literatura; Enseñanza del inglés como lengua extranjera; Aprendizaje integrado de Contenidos y Lenguas (CLIL); Crítica práctica.

1. Introduction

With the current overwhelming transactional, instrumental, and vocational focus in foreign language (FL) teaching (i.e., to get things done) (Hall, 2016), less attention is devoted to helping learners develop their own voice and identity in the target language (TL). The ongoing pursuit of automated language capabilities (as, for instance, in AI and automated translation systems) means there is a danger that FL interaction is reduced to smartphones and other electronic devices merely talking to each other. As argued by Seargeant (2024), when referring to communication in general, ‘there’s a real fear that the human capacity on which civilization itself was built – our ability to talk to one another, to express our thoughts and feelings via language, to converse and create consensus – is going to be instrumental in our downfall’ (p. 2).

In this article, we contend that this imbalance and challenge can be addressed to some degree through encouraging teachers to appreciate the benefits of studying literature in the FL classroom. Literature can promote agency and voice and put learners in greater control of their communicative objectives. Agency gives FL interlocutors ‘discursive choices regarding how they want to express themselves, gauge their contributions, and identify themselves with other TL users (Mugford, 2023, p. 96). Voice allows FL interactants to express beliefs, understandings, and positions that reflect their feelings and emotions (Bakhtin, 1981; Bowe, Martin & Manns, 2014; Pennycook, 2001). With this focus on agency and voice, the teaching of literature can instil a greater understanding of the benefits of studying literature for its own sake as well as in FL communication. Literature can help learners develop their own means of self-expression, understand others’ feelings and emotions, and consequently engage more effectively in TL as a whole.

To pursue this argument, we advocate that teachers build on learners’ first language (L1) knowledge, experiences, beliefs, and attitudes to both promote agency (Rogers & Mosley-Wetzel, 2013) and foster a greater sense of ownership of the TL (Seidhofer, 2011). These twin objectives encourage an understanding and awareness of literature and help learners develop an L2 personality and identity. To do so, we have adopted the Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) approach (Morton, 2016) since it offers a dual focus on both content and language. The content component involves ‘using language to accomplish concrete tasks and learn new content’ (Mehisto, Marsh & Frigols, 2008, p. 11). The language component reflects a focus on form (Doughty & Williams, 1998), which invites FL users to concentrate on relevant patterns of use rather than studying grammatical patterns merely for the sake of it.

To pursue this argument, the paper is structured as follows. First of all, we examine the role of teaching literature in English Language Teaching (ELT) as an end in itself and in developing, maintaining, and consolidating the learners' language proficiency. To offer a specific example, we examine the context of Mexican EFL learners engaging with TL literature and relating to it socially and societally. We take Sandra Cisneros's short story, *Woman Hollering Creek*, which deals with the plight of a Mexican woman who is cruelly thrust into a violent and brutal marriage. Whilst *Woman Hollering Creek* is an advanced language-level text, we argue that literature must be relatable to the world today and, therefore, this short story is particularly relevant to adult readers who recognize the ongoing problem of domestic violence in modern society. At the same time, we argue that our approach can be applied to less linguistically challenging texts. Secondly, adopting a 'practical criticism' approach (Eagleton, 2008), we examine how teachers can leverage foreign-language (FL) learners' own experiences, attitudes, and values to elicit the overt and covert meanings of the short story. In doing so, teachers play a secondary role in analysing literature as learners construct their own meanings and understandings. The literary analytical approach, practical criticism, invites learners to find their own meanings within the text rather than relying on external expert insights and evaluations. Thirdly, we study how teachers can employ CLIL to enhance learners' understanding of literature through a series of activities that encourage learners to develop their own voice and positionality. In pursuing the CLIL + practical criticism approach, we examine how literature can be employed to exploit the learners' first-language experiences, knowledge, and histories, but, hopefully, teachers' own experiences and insights have a role to play as they 'serve as central agents and facilitators of learning in the classroom' (Ishihara & Porcellato, 2022, p. 151).

2. Teaching Literature

With the advent of the communicative approach, literature was being taught less and less in the FL classroom, and as Stern (1992) observed over thirty years ago, 'the role of literature has declined and has been almost entirely crowded out' (p. 229). Furthermore, more recently, Hall (2016) noted that the literature was often underrepresented or downplayed in teacher training courses. Consequently, teachers and teacher trainees have not been given the ways and means to engage with literature in the FL classroom. Literature is seen as too challenging and unrelated to the above-mentioned transactional, instrumental, and vocational focus in foreign language (FL) teaching. Thornbury (2006) has summed up the situation as follows:

Literary texts do not feature much in ELT materials. This is mainly because they are considered difficult in terms of both their language and the interpretive work involved in reading them.

(p. 125)

We would add that literature has become less relevant in FL communication, which is focused on achieving concrete tasks and meeting tangible, ‘meaningful’ objectives. However, change may now be on the horizon, and teachers may be adopting Stern’s (1992) position that ‘the different literary genres have the power to evoke a quality of empathy and to develop the kind of understanding that is needed if we want to enter the thoughts, motives, and feelings of L2 speakers’ (p. 229). Consequently, we argue that teaching literature is a profitable enterprise as asserted by Hall (2016): ‘Literature can inspire, excite, and intrigue, and engagement and inspiration are desirable in education of all kinds’ (p. 456). It encourages individuality and creativity in the language-learning process. In this sense, the teacher’s role has become crucial. It is important to recognise that literature goes beyond language and content and reflects a pedagogy of possibility (Simon, 1992), in which teachers can help learners dream about what they want to achieve in the target language. As argued by Hall (2016): ‘... language is used in literary texts is actually centrally relevant to the needs of students in a wide range of situations in everyday life’ (Hall, 2016, p. 456). Literature does not need to be divorced from real-life events, obstacles, and struggles:

Literature can explore what it means to be human, including death, life and love; illness and health; what is right and wrong; social identity, including gender, race and ethnicity, and sexual orientation; feelings and emotions. Such issues can matter to a learner at a deeper level than a typical communicative ‘directions to the station’-type task. Literary texts can motivate language learners to want to understand, to express themselves and to define their own position and new identity by using what the L2 and its texts offer.

(Hall, 2016, p. 460)

Teachers can make literature relevant and related to the reader’s world and culture through *languaculture* (Agar, 1994; Risager, 2005, 2019). In the FL context, languaculture ‘highlights interconnectedness, difference and contrast regarding language and culture at personal, interactional, and societal levels’ (Mugford, forthcoming). Languaculture sees language and culture as intimately connected and intertwined rather than separately categorised aspects of language use. Languaculture can be key to understanding literature as teachers help learners to exploit learners’ schematic knowledge, i.e., experience and expectations of how the world is organised and how it works (Mugford, 2025). Such an approach makes an understanding and appreciation of literature relevant and worthwhile.

3. Practical criticism

Rather than presenting FL learners with pre-designated ‘great’ literature, a ‘practical criticism’ approach presents literary texts and invites the reader to evaluate them. Reader evaluation focuses on the perceived effectiveness of the writing rather than on the opinions of literary authorities. Although usually reflecting a strong focus on poetry, practical criticism can also be applied to other literary texts. As argued by Eagleton

(2008), practical criticism meant a method which spurned belle-lettristic waffle and was properly unafraid to take the text apart, but it also assumed that you could judge literary ‘greatness’ and ‘centrality’ by bringing focused attentiveness to bear...’ (p. 37). By promoting learner agency and voice, we invite learners to examine Cisneros’s *Woman Hollering Creek* through student noticing, skilful attentiveness, and reader awareness. Therefore, learners take their evaluative cue from their own analysis and appreciation of a text rather than submitting themselves to the erudite opinions of literary critics and ‘experts’ in the field. This stance has been underscored by Hall (2016):

If *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Bronte, *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe or any other classic writing is to be valued more highly than other texts, this is something students should be encouraged to do for themselves rather than just accepting hand-me-down-knowledge.
(p. 457)

Practical criticism encourages readers to focus on: 1) the text as the writer’s intention, 2) the intrinsic meaning of the text, and 3) the reader’s understanding of the text (Widdowson, 1992). These three objectives call on the reader to analyse a text from an emic (insider) perspective rather than an etic (outsider) perspective. An emic perspective highlights readers’ interest, involvement, and engagement with the text. Through a structured approach, readers can develop their own evaluation of a literary text. To form their own opinion by tearing a ‘text apart’, FL learners can begin with insights, experiences, attitudes, and understandings that their own L1 and culture (C1) bring to their reading and analysis of the text. As previously mentioned, this reflects a languaculture approach (Agar, 1994; Risager, 2005, 2019) as readers interrelate L1/C1 L2/C2 cultural and language knowledge:

The *langua* in languaculture is about discourse, not just about words and sentences. And the *culture* in languaculture is about meanings that include, but go well beyond, what the dictionary and the grammar offer.
(Agar, 1994, p. 96)

Therefore, practical criticism calls for a close reading of the text (Widdowson, 1992), as students bring their own understandings and perspectives to it. Literature can enable learners to see the TL culture (and perhaps their own language and culture) in new and perhaps unexpected ways: ‘It is widely acknowledged that literary texts may offer learners opportunities to develop critical reading skills that help them understand other cultures, thus acquiring new cultural frames of reference and a transformed world view’ (González Rodríguez & Borham Puyal, 2012, p. 105). Such reflection, analysis, and evaluation aim to encourage FL learners to express their own voice in assessing and appreciating literary texts.

4. Short story

In this section, we provide a very brief synopsis of Sandra Cisneros's short story, *Woman Hollering Creek*. A longer summary may involve conveying our own interpretation of the text, which would go against the basic tenets of CLIL and practical criticism.

Woman Hollering Creek was selected because it invites the Mexican EFL reader to reflect on topics as pertinent as migration, cross-border relationships, nostalgia, and alienation. It can be very briefly summarised as follows. The story narrates the predicament of Cleófilas Enriqueta DeLeón Hernández, who has been married 'off' to Juan Pedro Martínez Sánchez, who lives *en el otro lado* – the other side of the border separating Mexico and the United States. Finding herself pregnant in an abusive relationship, Cleófilas seeks a way to escape and return to her family south of the border. In relating Cleófilas' escape, the story is full of cultural references that underscore aspirations, hopes, disillusion, and disappointments.

So that language learners can easily find the short story which may not be readily accessible, a URL has been included in each extract.

5. Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL)

To exploit and explore what FL learners can achieve with language in expressing their own worldview, teachers need to adopt an approach that combines language development with the construction of knowledge and experience. To this end, CLIL offers a twofold way to achieve these objectives, as is expressly argued by Mehisto, Marsh, and Frigols (2008). '... CLIL is a tool for the teaching and learning of content and language' (p. 11). CLIL offers learners a way to appreciate the value of literature whilst increasing their language proficiency. Indeed, CLIL is claimed to promote cultural literacy and fluency in the target language while students apply prior knowledge and use cognitive skills (González Rodríguez & Borham Puyal, 2012, p. 109).

CLIL's dual focus is underscored by Mehisto et al. (2008):

- 1) Language learning is included in content classes (eg, maths, history, geography, computer programming, science, civics, etc). This means repackaging information in a manner that facilitates understanding. Charts, diagrams, drawings, hands-on experiments and the drawing out of key concepts and terminology are all common CLIL strategies.
- 2) Content from subjects is used in language-learning classes. The language teacher, working together with teachers of other subjects, incorporates the vocabulary, terminology and texts from those other subjects into his or her classes. Students learn the language and discourse patterns they need to understand and use the content.

It is a student's desire to understand and use the content that motivates him or her to learn the language. Even in language classes, students are likely to learn more if they are not simply learning language for language's sake, but using language to accomplish concrete tasks and learn new content.

(p. 11)

Rather than being labelled a method, CLIL should be seen as an approach that integrates language and content in culturally meaningful ways. Therefore, it lends itself to examining literary texts to promote agency and learner voice by developing language expression, criticism, and appreciation.

6. Proposal

To help learners critique literary texts, we follow Widdowson's (1992) focus by asking students to evaluate author intention, intrinsic meaning, and reader understanding. We argue that teachers have a key role to play in helping learners draw out possible meanings and interpretations through a pedagogy of possibility. A pedagogy of possibility gives learners the freedom to interpret a text based on 'one that works for the reconstruction of social imagination in the service of human freedom' (Simon, 1992, p. 4). As long as learners can validate and support their interpretation from inside the text itself, all interpretations are justified.

This proposal contemplates Sandra Cisneros' *Woman Hollering Creek* being taught in advanced language classes at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels. However, we feel that the proposal is equally applicable to general foreign-language intermediate and advanced courses with appropriate texts that encourage learners' interest and engagement.

Encouraging interest and understanding

To build on learners' existing knowledge, we aim to encourage reader interest and understanding by asking learners to skim the narrative, looking for possible cultural references in the text. In the case of *Woman Hollering Creek*, learners may notice a wide range of code-switching.

Learners can be invited to present their chosen words and phrases and comment on them. Possible choices could include *telenovela* (soap opera), *la consentida* (the spoiled one), *mala suerte* (bad luck), and *viejas* (in this context, a derogatory term for women). This is a language and culture awareness-raising activity. At the same time, the activity calls on learners to exploit denotational and connotational meaning. Denotational refers to dictionary meaning, whilst connotational meaning embraces social and cultural meaning. For instance, a *telenovela* is a television drama that features complex interpersonal (and highly emotional) relationships. Connotationally, in the Mexican context, *telenovela* can be seen as culturally loaded melodramas that cover social issues and often contrast rich/middle-class families with the plight of poorer ones. *Telenovelas* often reflect the aspirations for a better life.

Learners can be invited to explore their denotative and connotative understandings of Spanish-language words that pepper Cisneros's short story, *Woman Hollering Creek*. They may further investigate why a Spanish word is used rather than an English-language translation, e.g., *arroyo* instead of stream or *farmacia* instead of chemist's/drugstore.

Author intention

Learners can be invited to analyse the structure of the text, especially in terms of Labov's (1972) narrative structure answers, which can help readers identify the short story's purpose and the message Cisneros is trying to convey. Labov proposes answering the following key questions when analysing a text:

- a. Abstract: what was this about?
- b. Orientation: who, when, what where?
- c. Complicating action: then what happened?
- d. Resolution: so what?
- e. Result: what finally happened?

(p. 370)

Such an initial examination of the narrative structure allows learners to approach a text in a well-ordered manner as they decide for themselves what is going on and how the situation is resolved. This allows them to formulate their own understandings and opinions rather than have the text's meaning 'explained' to them.

Labov's (1972) narrative structure can be exploited in even greater detail by asking readers to purposefully examine the categories of abstract, orientation, complicating action, resolution, evaluation, and coda in detailed ways. These categories can be described and investigated as follows when examining *Woman Hollering Creek*:

Abstract offers a general 'hook' to draw the reader in. For instance, Cisneros begins the short story by focusing on cross-border marriage:

The day Don Serafin gave Juan Pedro Martinez Sanchez permission to take Cleofilas Enriqueta DeLeon Hernandez as his bride, across her father's threshold, over several miles of dirt road and several miles of paved, over one border and beyond to a town en el otro lado --on the other side--already did he divine the morning his daughter would raise her hand over her eyes, look south, and dream of returning to the chores that never ended, six good-for-nothing brothers, and one old man's complaints.

Cisneros S. *Woman Hollering Creek*. LA Times Archives

<https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1990-07-01-tm-890-story.html>

Consulted 18/08/2025

Orientation aims 'to identify in some way the time, place, persons, and their activity or the situation' (Labov, 1972, p. 364). Learners can be encouraged to examine signs and clues regarding the setting and the locality of the short story and any underlying symbols that may be relevant to help their understanding e.g. descriptions of the scenery.

In the town where she grew up, there wasn't very much to do except accompany the aunts and god-mothers to the house of one or the other to play cards. Or walk to the cinema to see this week's film again, speckled and with one hair quivering annoyingly on the screen. Or to the center of town to order a milkshake that would appear in a day and a half as a pimple on her backside. Or to the girlfriend's house to watch the latest telenovela episode and try to copy the way the women comb their hair, wear their makeup.

Cisneros S. *Woman Hollering Creek*. LA Times Archives

<https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1990-07-01-tm-890-story.html>

Consulted 18/08/2025

Complicating action reveals what happens in the narrative and what needs to be resolved. Learners can be asked to identify key issues in *Woman Hollering Creek* such as family conflict, estrangement and cultural isolation. Rather than being 'told' what to look for, learners may be asked to examine the meaning behind the use of words such as *defend*, *blood*, and *fight back* as can be seen in the extract below. In doing so learners can develop fundamental vocabulary to talk about abusive and toxic relationships whilst raising their own awareness of domestic violence issues.

The first time, she had been so surprised she didn't cry out or try to defend herself. She had always said she would fight back if a man, any man, were to strike her.

But when the moment came, and he slapped her once, and then again, and again, until the lip split and bled an orchid of blood, she didn't fight back, she didn't break into tears, she didn't run away as she imagined she might when she saw such things in the telenovelas.

Cisneros S. *Woman Hollering Creek*. LA Times Archives

<https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1990-07-01-tm-890-story.html>

Consulted 18/08/2025

Resolution involves identifying how the narrative settled? In the case of *Woman Hollering Creek* this will mean examining whether *Cleofilas Enriqueta DeLeon Hernandez* successfully escapes from her predicament and, if so, how this is achieved.

Evaluation reflects 'the means used by the narrator to indicate the point of the narrative, its *raison d'être*: why it was told, and what the narrator was getting at' (Labov, 1972, p. 366). In the case of *Woman Hollering Creek*, learners may want to reflect on the choice of title of the short story and its relevance to the plot and its ending.

Denouement reveals how the conflict identified in the complicating action is finally resolved. Readers can decide whether *Cleofilas Enriqueta DeLeon Hernandez* achieves her

objective in terms of going back to her previous life or building a new life with her baby.

There may also be a **Coda** which ends the narrative to 'bring the narrator and the listener back to the point in which they entered the narrative' (Labov, 1972, p. 364).

Intrinsic meaning

Learners can be asked to identify the intrinsic meaning of the text, whether it is one of hope and optimism or perhaps reflects a continuing, never-ending problem that offers few solutions. Students might want to relate *Cleofilas*' situation and predicament to their own communities. Teachers can help learners to focus on particular language items that help draw out or construct meaning through foregrounding, which is

a basic feature of many literary texts in which the text design draws attention to its linguistic forms (words and structures, sounds, spelling and so forth) signposts language for learners, enabling them to give the necessary attention to relevant linguistic features. This foregrounding often works in practice as exact or near repetition or other patterning, or through innovative figurative uses of language.

(Hall, 2016, p. 459)

For instance, students can look for and examine the role of the different participants in the short story and the roles that they play. They may want to foreground different characters. For instance, Felice is portrayed as the reluctant hero, and Graciela is the concerned, proactive doctor. Readers might want to summarise events from their point of view, which may allow them to draw out intrinsic meanings of the text.

Intrinsic meaning can also be approached through translanguaging:

CLIL teachers can use translanguaging deliberately as a pedagogic strategy, such as having students read a text in one language and write about it in another, and/or they can encourage/allow students to express multilingual identities through spontaneous use of the resources they have available to them.

(Morton 2016, p. 257)

Translanguaging allows learners to break from dominant English-language varieties and construct their own meanings through languaculture by combining L1/C1 and L2/C2 cultural and language knowledge:

the act of translanguaging itself creates the social space within the multilingual user that makes it possible to go between different linguistic structures and beyond them. It is *the speakers*, not the space, who are in control of the languaging performance, by bringing to

gether ‘different dimensions of their personal history, experience and environment, their attitude, belief and ideology, their cognitive and physical capacity’ (Li Wei, 2011:1223).
(Garcia & Li Wei, 2014, p. 39 - 40)

Reader understanding

Readers can be asked to evaluate the text and indicate where they would place it in terms of interest, effectiveness, and underlying message. They may be asked to comment on the effectiveness of using *telenovelas* as a backdrop to Cleófilas’ predicament. As previously mentioned, *telenovelas* often present the quest for a better life.

As a way to uncover reader understanding, learners may want to examine key phrases such as Cleófilas’ desperation as she reflects on ‘And no happy ending in sight’. They might want to reflect on Graciela’s comment: Another one of those brides from across the border, which gives the idea of recurring and hopeless situations.

To further promote reader understanding and appreciation, students may be invited to write the next ‘chapter’ in Cleófilas’ story. Does she really make it back to Mexico? Is there an effort to stop her? If she does return, how does her family receive her? Do they accept her decision? Does the presumably angry husband come looking for her? The possibilities are endless and depend entirely on learners’ interpretations and interests in the story.

7. Conclusion

This CLIL–practical criticism model offers a way to exploit literature by building on learners’ L1/C1 and L2/C2 cultural and language knowledge and developing an appreciation of literature and language use. It involves building on existing resources:

this approach highlights the need to support learners in making connections between everyday and academic oral and written language (and other modes) in both other primary language and the CLIL language of instruction.

(Morton 2016, p. 255)

In this paper, we have argued that learners’ first-language knowledge, experiences, and histories should be at the forefront of foreign-language teaching, with literature as content and reader involvement as language development. Since this is a proposal, the next step is to provide empirical evidence to assess its feasibility and determine whether it should be modified if necessary.

By focusing on the Mexican English-language learning context, we argued that short stories such as Sandra Cisneros’s *Woman Hollering Creek* can help learners to develop an appreciation of literature and increase their own understanding of language use. Furthermore, it promotes cultural awareness and sensitivity.

Just as importantly, we have argued that literature must be relatable to the language users’ everyday world and relevant topics such as the problem of domestic violence in mod-

ern society. We have also shown how teachers can build on learners' experiences, attitudes, and values to make literature more relevant and engaging for their students.

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