



CASE STUDY

Postmodern Groupwork: Developing as a Learner and Thinker through EAP

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ABSTRACT

Postmodernism has been defined as questioning the metanarratives that underpin much traditional thinking, such as universal truth and scientific progress. This gives opportunity, in a society where knowledge is valued as that which can be transmitted and computed, to the proliferation of a culture of efficiency and performance. Decentring traditional narratives can also open up a different way of thinking, where (postmodern) knowledge can instead be more fluid, multiple, local and a shared endeavour. The purpose of this study is to imagine an EAP classroom without the common metanarratives (e.g. knowledge as a cultivation of the self, homogeneous student outcomes) or performative substitutes (e.g. knowledge as a personal commodity, performed outcomes) that may underpin EAP activities.

In a Foundation EAP course at a Scottish university, where learners worked on a group research project, I experimented with a postmodern approach. This involved working with mixed home and international students, supporting collaborative endeavour and welcoming heterogeneous outcomes. The usefulness of the study lies in its proposal of a type of postmodern approach that is under-explored in EAP, but powerful as a challenge to ubiquitous performativity.

KEYWORDS:

Postmodernism, metanarratives, performativity, language games, Literacy in 3D



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Introduction

Teachers are frequently asked to monitor the effectiveness of EAP provision. Learning outcomes may be benchmarked to CEFR criteria (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, 2020), to make sure that students can demonstrate a level that reflects institutional requirements. A coursebook may be used to supplement or even define an EAP syllabus, to ensure that all language input has been 'covered'. Students may be asked to confirm the helpfulness of their EAP course through feedback questions and Likert scales. Such benchmarks and monitoring systems within education are discussed by Stephen Ball in his influential 2003 article, following the ideas of Lyotard, in terms of their *performativity*, by which Ball means:

A technology, a culture and a mode of regulation that employs judgements, comparisons and displays as means of incentive, control, attrition and change.

(Ball, 2003, p.216)

Technology of performativity aims for numerical objectivity, culturally presented as a form of common sense. Further examples could be attendance tracking or counting students' online discussion posts, using numerical data to prove they are suitably engaged. At the same time, performativity may create uncertainty around reasons for taking a certain course of action: is it because teachers believe it is important or is it because of the need to measure and compare, to quantify quality and success?

Lyotard's theory of performativity is closely related to what he terms 'the post-modern condition', the name of his 1979 book, published in English in 1984. The post-modern condition describes a cultural shift when familiar universal truths lose their grip and performative principles step into that space, which is especially likely in a technologically advanced capitalist society. It is part of a wider *postmodernism*, which also has potential for freeing up space for a more positive and discursive way of thinking about knowledge (Lyotard, 1984). In the next section I will explore Lyotard's thinking about postmodern knowledge and how some of his concepts can help indicate a different approach to EAP in universities. Then I will discuss how I experimented with this approach with a Foundation class.

Postmodernism

Lyotard defined postmodernism 'as an incredulity towards metanarratives' (Lyotard, 1984, p.xxiv). By metanarratives or 'grand narratives', he meant universal stories told to legitimise systems of knowledge, for example, the narratives of Enlightenment scientific progress, bounded disciplines, universal truth and individual self-sufficiency. According to Lyotard, the fading legitimacy of these 'modern' grand narratives, leaves space for what he termed 'the postmodern condition', a culture of efficiency and performance, to take their place. Where a system of shared values has broken down, a system that is operationally efficient may become an attractive way to measure worth. This could happen in higher education when traditional values of academic quality are replaced by target-setting and output measurement

(Murphy et al., 2020). In EAP it could mean defining a syllabus through a global coursebook because every activity in that resource is already benchmarked to a specific and recognised language level. This removes much responsibility from an individual teacher and could be considered easier to implement when provision must be consistent and evidenced across cohorts and academic years. However, postmodernist questioning of familiar structures (universal truth, scientific progress etc.), is not only about performativity. Questioning those structures also opens up a different way of thinking, where knowledge is not tied to linear progress or bounded disciplines or the self-sufficient individual. Knowledge can instead be more fluid, multiple, local and a shared endeavour.

Within this positive framing, Lyotard (1984) discusses two types of postmodernism, and both are underpinned by 'incredulity' or questioning towards metanarratives. The first, aesthetic or 'ludic' postmodernism is a playful reaction to modern art and is probably the more familiar. An example is Duchamp's (1951) famous bicycle wheel set on a plinth in an art gallery, breaking with the metanarrative of art as traditional representation and asking: what is art?. The second type of postmodernism is philosophical and names a shift in values or practices compared with the 'modern' period. Lyotard intends the modern period as after the Middle Ages and including the Enlightenment developments in science, technology and politics (Lyotard, 1984). 'Post' suggests that the postmodern follows the modern on a historical timeline, but this is not necessarily the case. Although it is common to identify the postmodern in post-industrial developed societies, it is also possible to find postmodern attitudes in any epoch (Foucault, 1986). It is a way of thinking rather than something fixed to the late 20th and 21st centuries.

Lyotard's (1984) general methodology is language games, by which he means the heterogeneity of language elements and their pragmatic combinations, each with particular rules like a game. He explains that these rules form a contract between players, who make *moves* in the game through their utterances. Modification of a rule shifts the nature of the game, in subtle or even profound ways and it is these changes that can lead to new knowledge and innovative practice. If this second type of postmodernism can support a shift in values or practices in EAP, and apply the notion of language games, what would that look like? Before considering how I experimented with this with the Foundation class, I will define the EAP metanarratives that I was keen to move away from.

EAP Metanarratives

CEFR metanarrative

In a Lyotardian sense, frameworks such as the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) can be understood as a metanarrative of language learning and assessment. Although the CEFR presents itself as a descriptive, flexible, and non-prescriptive framework, it also functions as a powerful organising narrative that standardises language

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development into linear, hierarchical levels (A1–C2). The CEFR implies that language proficiency progresses cumulatively along a largely uniform developmental trajectory.

Language as individual acquisition metanarrative

This narrative presents language proficiency as a stable, internal attribute of individual learners and positions success or failure as the outcome of personal attainment rather than socially situated practice. Lyotard (1984) explains how knowledge becomes legitimated through performativity, measurability, and efficiency, and Ball (2003, influenced also by Foucault) develops the idea of performative worth of individuals.

The assessment-performance metanarrative

This metanarrative assumes that academic competence can be demonstrated through discrete, assessable products, such as essays, reports, or exams and that effective pedagogy therefore consists primarily in training students to reproduce these products successfully. Language use is thus reduced to the mastery of observable features that can be reliably graded. Lyotard's (1984) concept of performativity explains why assessment-driven pedagogies become dominant: knowledge is legitimised by what can be measured, reproduced, and efficiently evaluated.

A Postmodern Curriculum

This section first considers the broad influence of postmodernism in EAP, then how postmodern ideas have shaped the pedagogical approach in this case study.

EAP has been strongly influenced by critical pedagogy and the academic literacies tradition, which foreground writing as a socially situated practice shaped by power, identity, and institutional norms rather than a set of neutral skills. Drawing on postmodern and poststructuralist ideas (from philosophers such as Lyotard and Foucault), critical pedagogy rejects the assumption that education is value-free or that emancipation follows a single universal trajectory. Instead, it emphasises how knowledge is produced within specific historical, cultural, and institutional contexts (Giroux, 2004; Lyotard, 1984,) an orientation that has increasingly shaped critical approaches to EAP (Walsh Marr, 2021). This orientation closely aligns with the academic literacies approach, which conceptualises reading and writing not as transferable technical skills but as socially situated practices shaped by disciplinary conventions, institutional power relations, and identity (Lea & Street, 1998; Lillis, 2019). Together, these perspectives have influenced EAP by shifting it toward a more critical and reflective engagement with academic discourse, treating academic English as a set of negotiable practices rather than fixed rules and recognising students' multilingual repertoires and prior experiences as resources rather than deficits.

This critical turn can lead to tensions with high-stakes pressures to conform in order to pass assessments. Rejecting competency-based EAP can leave students without the resources they are looking for in an EAP course, in order to accommodate to university academic writing requirements (Walsh Marr, 2021; Wingate, 2012). If the critical turn in EAP has been important in broadening how academic language learning is understood, its limitations suggest the need for an approach that enables all students to participate effectively in academic communities and beyond, where 'participating effectively' is understood as multi-faceted and including language development. One such approach is described next.

De Alba, et al. (2000 p.12) suggest a postmodern curriculum can be framed around the question:

What kinds of things should we be learning and teaching to prepare learners as well as possible for handling what comes in the future, and to...act better now?

This frames learners as citizens with responsibilities. It frames the curriculum as a way of nurturing learners to act responsibly, and so implicitly those creating the curriculum take responsibility too. A way of putting a postmodern curriculum into practical terms, that emphasises different dimensions of that effective participation, is Green's *Literacy in 3D* framework (explained in detail in Green and Beavis, 2012, proposed within the postmodern approach to curriculum in de Alba et al., 2000 and employed recently in EAP research: Burgess and Rowsell, 2020). This framework conceptualises literacy around three interconnected dimensions: operational, cultural and critical. The operational and cultural dimensions are about linguistic choices and how these establish writer/speaker stance and position readers/listeners. The operational level concerns the components, the language repertoire with which to engage in an activity and to support experimentation. The cultural dimension is closely linked, conceiving culture as a meaning system. It deals with the social practice of text and readers/listeners' part in that.

The critical dimension of Green's framework is not the superficial questioning or *performed critique* (de Alba et al., 2000) that passes for critical thinking. Green's critical dimension is where learners are given access to the grounds for selection of material and the processes for its interpretation, leading to a role in its transformation and production:

A socially critical perspective in literacy culture and schooling recognises that these are not and cannot be neutral concepts.

(Green, 2012, p.7)

This means that EAP cannot be a neutral concept either.

In Green's (2012) model, literacy is understood as a broad activity that includes but is not restricted to writing. Context is understood as institutional but also situational and cultural, with particular connections drawn to Halliday's mappings of register and genre. Literacy is seen as cooperative and socio-culturally informed; learners chart their own courses (Lyotard, 1984)

and their outcomes are not all the same. Reading and writing take particular emphasis and both are seen as active and productive processes. Writing can enable learners to put their thinking at a distance and then work on it, to turn ideas round and return to them, a process of 'deliberate semantics' that Green borrows from Vygotsky (1962, p.100).

Another part of learners' possible access to being able to turn ideas around within language games (operationalising Lyotard's postmodernism) is other languages which they may use independently or in communicating with each other. Jenkins (2015) proposes 'repertoires in flux' to describe the linguistic heterogeneity which is likely to accompany international students (but surely many UK-based students as well). This can include translanguaging but also a less observable inner dialogue between resources from speakers' first or other language backgrounds and English (Hülmbauer, 2013). The inner dialogue of translation and translanguaging suggests possibility for inventiveness. Opening EAP to these resources emphasises the contribution of students as active knowers.

Finally, it is useful to broaden language games and linguistic repertoires through the kind of social semiotic approach proposed by Iedema (2001, p.27) who defines social semiotics as an approach that:

sets no boundaries around what is text and what is not, around what can be analysed and what not. In that sense, social semiotics is a means to 'making strange', to consciousness-raising and to informed social action.

This positions writing as just one mode embedded in a multimodal communication context. Arlene Archer (2022) terms *transduction*, the process of moving meaning-material from one mode to another, one way of working with modes to 'make strange'. She proposes allowing students to experiment with modes and media and their linguistic resources, including multilingual resources, to understand their affordances and exploit them mindfully. This combines the playfulness of ludic postmodernism (Lyotard, 1984). Archer's EAP students chart their courses through language game-oriented activities (such as one-on-one consultations, writing workshops, engaging with online writing resources and videos, working in physical open writing spaces, recording discussions to listen again later (Archer, 2022). These methods are aligned to the open, interactive and multimodal literacy practices described by de Alba, et al. (2000), where learning is non-curricular in the traditional sense, but a multi-person dialogue in a creative studio space, where and the teacher describes what a project is/is not and then steps back.

In the next section, I will explain how I used some ideas from the literature above to work with a group of EAP students in a way that would reduce the performative and individualistic, in favour of the collaborative.

Case Study

I was working with Foundation students, who had EAP classes twice a week (4 hours in total) in groups where Business pathway and Science pathway students, both 'home' and 'international' students were mixed. The set Learning Outcomes for the course were about developing language skills to meet university expectations, constructing academic texts, incorporating source material, presenting/discussing and working effectively in groups. One of the tasks set for the second semester was a 10-week group project on the topic of Education, developing a research poster to be presented at a poster event. I decided to experiment with a more postmodern approach in the group project and obtained ethical approval and consent to use the data from many students in my two classes.

The levels of engagement and general performance of these students was rather mixed. Some students were questioning whether university was the right place for them and this became evident in the topics they chose for their group projects.

Group 1	Group 2	Group 3
Piotr: English/ second generation Polish Tavish: Scottish/ Sri Lankan/ Italian Laith: Scottish/ second generation Pakistani	Sarah: Scottish Uchechi: English/ second generation Nigerian Archie: Scottish	Jane: English, Ed: English James: Scottish

Table 1: Three groups discussed here, showing cultural background

Steps in the project

1. Learners noted down who they would like to work with and I tried to accommodate these wishes, whilst keeping the groups diverse in terms of gender, and school education experience. Some learners had experienced education outside the UK, but most had experienced either the English education system or the Scottish. I told the students their groups and gave them a few days to ask for any adjustments..
2. Looking at the published task brief and assessment criteria for the project, we discussed the project requirements. I explained that one of their weekly lessons would be a workshop for developing the project and that they would make a team on Microsoft Teams for asynchronous and synchronous working together.

3. Each group spent one hour discussing what they were interested in about the topic of Education. Each group made a Team on Microsoft Teams and added me to it. They added information about the topic(s) they were interested in and links to academic sources they found that could help them think around their possible topics.
4. The groups read their sources and wrote annotations about them (posted in their Teams). They discussed what the sources told them and identified a question to be addressed in their projects. Ideas for the question were also discussed in the Team chat (see Table 2).
5. Student groups prepared a few questions to ask classmates about their experiences relating to the selected topics. This led to class interaction and some general discussion.
6. Student groups identified themes from their reading and questionnaires/discussion and began drafting the poster slide.
7. Student groups looked at other groups' poster drafts and wrote questions and comments on a Microsoft Form (one Form for each poster). This was another chance for class interaction, using a series of written threads to encourage small group discussion and more reflection. Each group received the written feedback/questions for their own poster. They were able to adjust their poster according to feedback. This also helped them predict the questions they might be asked in the final poster show event.
8. The posters were printed and the poster show took place together with other classes. Groups were encouraged to mingle and ask questions about each other's posters, as well as to discuss their posters with two assessors.

During the 10 weeks, one 2-hour EAP lesson each week became a workshop for groups to develop their projects. During workshops groups worked together and I circulated to discuss progress with each group. Learners also worked on the project outside of class and interacted with each other asynchronously on Teams. I monitored the Teams activity but contributed only to encourage critical thinking and focus, usually by asking questions. I used the Team chat posts to help me reflect on what I might ask the group face-to-face in the following lesson. The low-key role I took was following de Alba, et al. (2000), where learning is a multi-person dialogue in a creative studio space, and the teacher takes a non-directive role.

Findings

Critical Dimension

The choice of topics and the discussion that led to them was one of the most successful aspects of the project, connecting to Green's (2012) critical dimension where learners are given access to the grounds for selection of material and the processes for its interpretation.

<u>Group 1</u>	1. How does moving schools to different countries effect your learning?
	2. Do you think that graduate apprenticeship is better than undergraduate degree?
	3. Comparing the English and Scottish education systems?
<u>Group 2</u>	should everyone go to university?
	how many people end up using their degrees?
<u>Group 3</u>	Funding? University worth going? Two ideas now
	Should university be free?
	Should university be free for everyone? (as some people do get it for free)

Table 2: Initial ideas for research questions, from each group's Team chat discussion

The students brought their personal experience to the questions, concentrating on different countries' education systems and the experience of moving between them, on whether university was worth the cost and if so, who should be paying. They used academic sources to nudge their ideas forward and one group chose to visualise their stance:

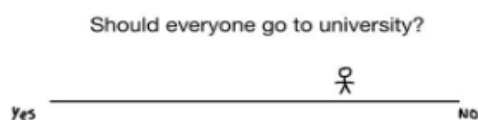


Figure 1: Group 2 expressing their stance in the Teams chat

Learners were given access to the grounds for selection of material and the processes for its interpretation (Green, 2012), and this led them to reflect critically on their own choice to attend university. That most groups chose quite similar topics was also an opportunity for the workshops to become the multi-person dialogue in a creative studio space proposed by de_Alba et al. (2000). This was especially evident in the activity where they gave peer feedback and asked questions on the threads (step 7 in the process described above).

Operational and cultural dimensions

The operational and cultural dimensions of language were evident in both the process of developing ideas as a group and in the final poster event. During the process of developing the projects, most group members were able to use language that opened up discussion, often through asking open questions in Teams:

How do the assessment methods differ between Scottish and English education? How do teacher training programs compare between Scotland and England?

Tavish, group 1

Do you feel more responsible from living on your own in university dorms/halls? do you wish you took a different route from university?

Sarah, group 2

They also used less direct questioning, welcoming other voices:

We are all interested in this question (Are people in the UK put off attending higher education due to the cost?) because it is relevant as a common issue now and on a personal level – the difference in our systems. ... We will find out from the sources that we have gathered as well as the expectations of the students as well

Jane, group 3

(this is the start of the questionnaire, any ideas feel free to suggest) also i made a brief poster plan in files for the tasks we need to do

Ed, group 3

These contributions reveal an openness to the possible research findings and to working collaboratively. Using the Team for asynchronous discussion acted as a way for learners to put their thinking at a distance and then work on it, to turn ideas round and return to them, through ‘deliberate semantics’ (Vygotsky, 1962, p.100).

Where this kind of reflection happened to a more limited degree was in presenting the research in the assessed poster event itself. In group 1, the slide was developed by only one of the group and begun too early in the 10-week project. By week 5, the poster structure was already set, in an attempt to manage the project top-down. This made it difficult for the other two group members to participate critically, as the content seemed to have been decided. Group 2 spent too long developing ideas and reading, leaving the poster creation until the last minute. Both of these groups’ posters were multimodally disappointing, with information described in immense detail (group 1) or haphazardly arranged over the slide (group 2). Once printed the posters were A2 in size and on a wall, which magnified awkwardnesses that had

seemed less significant on a small computer screen. It was also notable that groups had often ignored my feedback suggestions on visual aspects of their work.

Group 3 made a better attempt at using the poster as a chance to move ideas forward. They produced a timeline about student loans from the 1990s onwards, making the policy context clearer, and identified three themes, set out in lozenge shapes on the slide, to help address their research question. Colour choices helped to clarify information. The group's oral interaction during the assessment was also good, although nobody was able to explain why a graph had been selected that stopped at 2006, leaving the following seventeen years unaccounted for. The assessed interactions of groups 1 and 2 were weak and this was disappointing because the project had included many positive interactions and activities that were lost because only the poster event counted in the final (individual) mark.

Expanding learners' linguistic repertoires through welcoming other language systems was not something that happened extensively. In group 1, two students spoke Urdu together on occasion, but this was not a direct influence on the poster project. What seemed more significant for this group was the friendly way of interacting they developed on Teams, largely due to Tavish: who wrote a lot of informal but reflective messages, possibly whilst working in a fast-food restaurant the evenings or whilst travelling home after work. Groups 2 and 3 all posted messages on Teams to build a friendly collaboration within the groups. However, in both groups one student attended the workshop sessions less frequently than the other two group members and this certainly impacted on the process, creating some resentment from those who were attending more regularly.

Student Reflection

During the subsequent academic year, when the learners had left Foundation and transferred to degrees, I invited them to reflect on the experience of the groupwork and to compare it with group presentation projects they had worked on in the first semester of their degrees.

All those interviewed had participated in assessed group work during the first semester of their degrees (following Foundation) and all of them had struggled with this. Uchechi described other group members disappearing halfway through a project or never showing up at all. Another member of her current group project believed he had done all the work, whereas the other members believed they had been pushed out or ignored. On degrees, group members were usually asked to report on other group members and say who had done what. This was tricky when there were marks for working together, as admitting that the group had not functioned well would impact that mark. This also endorses a model where students monitor other students, in a way entirely aligned with performativity.

Students reported that it was common on degrees to use a jigsaw approach to group work, dividing up the tasks so everyone took a portion of the work and then posted it to one

person, who put everything together and submitted it. One student (James) explained why the jigsaw approach is common and then contrasted it with our Foundation project:

I think the reason that's maybe more kind of everyone just does their own bit and puts it together is because there's a real emphasis to do that. You're there for yourself and you're just trying to get the pass, get the good marks and move on to the next stage.... The way that you [this researcher] had approached teaching and to build up to the assessment [during the Foundation project] really took us away from that mindset of I just want a good result to actually let's do something that we're interested in. And to be honest, ... I didn't really mind. I didn't really do it with the results in mind. We didn't really think too much about what the mark would be because we were focused on having fun.

Discussion and Conclusion

My experiment with a postmodern approach to EAP produced mixed outcomes, which I evaluate here first through the EAP metanarratives defined earlier. Although the CEFR (EAP metanarrative 1) was never explicitly referenced during the course, it was present in the evaluation criteria of the final poster assessment. However innovative the pedagogy, the end point was the same as before and this was impactful, as I reflect on below. In contrast, the project design deliberately resisted the individualised learning pathway of EAP metanarrative 2 by foregrounding collaboration. Class-time workshops, asynchronous use of Microsoft Teams, and shared feedback via Microsoft Forms supported a genuinely cooperative process rather than a jigsaw of individual contributions assembled at the end. Timetabled workshop time and shared online spaces were particularly effective in positioning group work as a meaningful academic practice rather than a test of assumed communication skills. Nonetheless, some learners either stepped forward to manage the work or stepped back to allow others to lead.

Rather than treating these behaviours as individual deficits (e.g. domination or free-riding), it was important to understand them as contextually produced, shaped in part by the persistence of an individually assessed final product. Research consistently shows that prior experiences of group work strongly shape how students interpret collaboration, influencing motivation, trust, and perceptions of risk (Healey, Doran & McCutcheon, 2018), and these prior frames were clearly at play here.

The continued presence of a high-stakes final assessment highlights the difficulty of fully distancing experimental pedagogy from EAP metanarrative 3: assessment-performance. This tension was particularly evident in the students' limited engagement with multimodality and multilingualism. Engagement with the visual mode remained limited, with insufficient experimentation with scale or with transduction, the movement of meaning across modes (Archer, 2022). However, following a Lyotardian understanding of performativity, this limited engagement should not be read as simple resistance. Again, learners' prior educational

experiences, dominated by monolingual, print-based, exam-oriented assessment, may have narrowed expectations of what counts as legitimate academic work. When assessment criteria privilege conventional written products, students rationally avoid practices perceived as weakly legitimised (Wingate, 2012).

Multilingualism and rhetorical confidence were unevenly distributed across the cohort. Yet, as with multimodality, multilingual practices were constrained by institutional norms. Although translanguaging and multilingual approaches are increasingly promoted within EAP, their impact can remain limited because assessment structures are product-oriented, standardised, and English-only, thereby framing multilingualism as additive rather than transformative (Wang & East, 2023). From a Lyotardian perspective, this again reflects the dominance of performativity, through which only practices that are measurable and assessable gain legitimacy, making alternative resources visible but unusable in high-stakes contexts.

Green's Literacy in 3D provides a productive lens for interpreting the uneven outcomes of this case study without reverting to linear progress narratives or deficit explanations. Rather than viewing operational, cultural, and critical literacies as stages to be mastered, the model allows these dimensions to be understood as dynamically shaped by institutional conditions. In this project, the cultural dimension was most strongly supported, particularly through collaborative knowledge-building and negotiated engagement with policy and disciplinary meanings. By contrast, the operational dimension narrowed under the pressure of assessment, limiting students' willingness to experiment multimodally, while the critical dimension emerged intermittently but was difficult to sustain in the presence of high-stakes evaluation. Seen through a Literacy in 3D lens, these imbalances reflect not learner resistance or pedagogical failure, but the effects of performative regimes that legitimise some forms of meaning-making while marginalising others. Literacy in this sense is not a stable achievement but a situated practice, and success is better understood as learners' developing agency to navigate, negotiate, and occasionally contest what counts as legitimate academic work within constrained institutional contexts.

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