

Attribution and language learning narratives: A study of French third language learners in federal universities in South-east, Nigeria

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Abstract

Attribution is an important psychological concept that plays a pivotal role in language learning, explaining how language students perceive and attribute their language success and failures. However, its research in language learning has been focused extensively on learners of English as a second language, with very little attention given to learners of French as a third language. This descriptive qualitative study investigated how French third language learners attribute their language successes and failures and how sociodemographic variables contribute to individual differences in French third language learners' perception of success and failures in learning French. Twelve participants from two Federal universities in Southeast, Nigeria took part in this study during the first semester of the 2025 academic session. Through three phases of open-ended interviews, data were gathered and analyzed using thematic content analysis approach. The investigation showed that French third language learners attribute their language success and failures to their ability, efforts and task difficulty. Furthermore, this study reveals that sociodemographic variables such as age, gender and family support contribute to individual differences in how French third language learners perceive their language successes and failures.

Keywords: Adult, Literacy, Community development, Empowerment, Programmes

Introduction

Recently, most French language learners, particularly those in the South-eastern geopolitical zone of Nigeria have reported that learning French as a third language in Nigeria can be quite challenging and difficult (Akuneme and Nwosu, 2022; Obinna, Maduagwu, Nelson and Onyeka, 2019). One of the reasons is particularly because French language is non-native to them and are also being studied outside of the environment where the language is commonly spoken (Toyama and Yamazaki, 2021). Another contributory factor may be linked to the fact that in the southeastern geopolitical zone of Nigeria, most students learning French as a third language have little or no knowledge of French language before studying it as full-fledged degree course at the university level. As might be expected, studying a foreign language at the university level without sufficient prior knowledge of the language, may prove to be a bit challenging and difficult for some French third language learners.

Due to these challenges, while striving to attain an excellent degree of proficiency in French language, some French third language learners tend to experience not only success in their language tasks, but as well as failures. Interestingly, students differ in the way they perceive their academic successes or failures. In the context of education, this is referred to as attribution. Attribution is a well-known psychological concept that plays a crucial role in explaining how students perceive and interpret their academic successes or failures, attributing them to either an internal or external cause (Digia and Zdravkovi, 2019; García y García, 2021). Naturally, in a bid to

analyze the reasons behind their language successes and failures, some French language learners may first seek to understand the underlying cause of their success or failures, by posing such questions as “Why did I perform well in this language test?” or “Why did I perform poorly in this assignment?”. While some other students are likely to just attribute their successes and failures to specific factors, such as possibly attributing their poor language performance to a lack of ability rather than lack of effort. However, any given explanation that French language learners attribute to their language success and failures can have a significant impact on their future language learning behavior and outcomes (Galindo, Candeias, Lipowska, Sousa and Stueck, 2022; Gordeeva, Sheldon and Sychev, 2020; Munir, 2020). Therefore, understanding French third language learners' attributions and the potential impact it could have on their language performance is essential to promoting French third language learners' language success.

Literature Review

2.1 Attribution of French third language learners

Attribution is a psychological concept that is deeply anchored in Weiner's (1974) attribution theory. It has been conceptualized to be classified into three different dimensions; locus of causality, stability, and controllability (García y García, 2021; Nemer, Sutherland, Chow, and Kunemund, 2019). These different dimensions have attracted considerable attention in literature (Kasap and Ünsal, 2021).

Locus of causality refers to whether the cause of a learner's success or failure is internal or external to the learner (Graham, 2020). It describes whether students attribute the cause of their learning outcomes to internal or external factors. For instance, when students attribute their academic successes and failures to their own personal ability, efforts, traits, intelligence or natural talents, research indicates that they have attributed their learning outcomes to internal factors (Lee, 2022). External attribution, on the other hand, involve external factors that are beyond the learners' control such as luck, task difficulty and the teacher's grading practices (Drew, 2023). For example, when learners think their academic success is due to luck, it's an external attribution. Research has also shown that both internal and external attributions can influence learners' academic decisions and may also affect their learning strategies (Gerace, 2020). For example, students who attribute their success to internal factors such as efforts may persistently practice and work hard to attain language proficiency while students who blame external factors such as task difficulty or luck may give up easily in the face of challenges.

Another dimension of students' attribution is stability. Stability reflects the apparent persistence of the perceived cause of learners' success or failure (Graham, 2020; Wang and Hall, 2018). It refers to whether the cause of students' success or failure is perceived as stable (consistent over time) or unstable (temporary). When the cause is perceived as stable, it simply reflects that the cause of a learner's success or failure is due to unchanging factors (Lapite and Maree, 2022). For instance, a learner's ability or intelligence are considered as lasting characteristics, therefore, they can be regarded as relatively stable attributions (García y García, 2021; Graham, 2020). Language students with stable attributions are more likely to consistently attribute their language success to their inherent ability and intelligence, and this may make them feel more confident. On the other hand, the efforts learners put in their academics can be regarded as an unstable attribution, because learners' efforts can vary from one situation to another (Wang and Hall, 2018). For some language students, when they attribute their language success to the amount of effort they put in, they may attribute language difficulties and setbacks to a temporary lack of effort and might be motivated to improve. In other words, making unstable attributions implies that a learner's cause of success or failure are primarily due to unstable, temporary factors and can be improved.

Controllability, which is also another dimension of students' attribution reflects whether the cause of a learner's success or failure is within the learner's control or not (Song, Kim and Bong, 2020). For instance, research indicates that students' efforts or study strategies are described as controllable attributions because they can be influenced by students, while attribution like luck is seen as uncontrollable because it is beyond the learner's control (García y García, 2021). In the same vein, students who attributes their success to their disciplined study routine make a controllable attribution while students who attribute their failure to the test being difficult make uncontrollable attributions. This suggests that when language students are given language tasks, guiding them to

focus on factors within their control, such as effort and study habits, rather than on external uncontrollable factors like luck or task difficulty is very essential.

2.2 Sociodemographic Variables and French Third Language Learners' Attribution

Looking closely at the factors that could contribute to individual differences in French third language learners' attribution, demographic variables such as age, gender, family and social support, and previous experiences could be considered. Considering age, age is one of the variables that could possibly impact how French third language learners attribute their language successes and failures. This is given that as students grow and mature, their emotion and cognition also develop, making it more likely for them to have a more complex and clearer understanding of how ability and effort interact in language learning (Beaumont et.al, 2023). Research has shown for instance, that younger language students, are more likely to attribute their language successes and failures to external variables such as task difficulty, luck or teaching method, and this could also be due to the fact that the cognitive abilities needed to understand the link between their own efforts and outcomes are still developing (Hahlin and Granfeldt, 2021). Meanwhile, older language students are more likely to have a clearer and well-developed perspective of their own skills and may also have the ability to engage in self-reflection and then be able to attribute their language learning success to individual effort, tactics, or intelligence (Meritan and Mroz, 2019). What this suggests is that as students become older, they embrace more complex perspectives of their language learning experiences, shift from more external to internal attributions, and have a greater knowledge of how methods and effort affect success.

Research also suggests that **gender** can influence students' attribution styles (Ngunu, Kinai and Ndambuki, 2019). For instance, male students may be more likely to attribute their failures to external factors like task difficulty or a lack of resources, while female students are frequently shown to be more likely to attribute their achievements and failures to effort. However, based on personal experiences and cultural expectations, these patterns may differ. In some contexts, gender preconceptions about language learning could also be relevant. For instance, in some cultural contexts, some languages like French, which is frequently regarded as a "romantic" language may be seen as better suited for women (Li, Wang and Shen, 2024). This could affect how male and female students approach language acquisition and attribute success or failure.

Another variable that could contribute to how language students attribute their language successes and failures is Family and social support. Recent studies have identified the unique roles that family and social support play in shaping students' perception of success and accomplishment (Roksa and Kinsley, 2019). This is to say that the level of support a student receives from their family can influence how they perceive their language learning experiences. For example, students who believe their families support them are more likely to attribute their success to personal effort and also

view setbacks as learning experiences rather than tests of aptitude (Gana, Rad and Stoian, 2023). On the other hand, students without family support might focus on external help or circumstances (Lindberg, 2019; Roksa and Kinsley, 2019). Also, other social support, approach and guidance from teachers and peers can also influence language students’ attribution styles (Akanaeme, Kalu and Onyishi, 2022). For example, a teacher who emphasizes effort, persistence, and improvement may encourage students to attribute successes to these internal factors, whereas a teacher who focuses primarily on results or innate talent may foster external attributions. Also, students who experience peer support are more likely to participate actively in classroom tasks, attributing their successes to collaborative efforts rather than individual capabilities.

Going through the literature, it was observed that most of the studies carried out on foreign language learners’ attribution were focused mainly on learners of English as a foreign language and also as a second language, with very little attention given to learners of French as a third language. Also, most of the studies carried out on foreign language attribution were mainly quantitative in nature. As a result, this study aims to fill this gap in the literature.

The present study adopted a qualitative approach to investigate how French third language learners attribute their language successes and failures and how sociodemographic variables contribute to individual differences in French third language learners’ perception of success and failures in learning French. It also seeks to answer the research questions.

- 1) How do French third language learners attribute their French language successes and failures?
- 4) How do socio-demographic variables (age, gender and family support) contribute to individual differences in French third language learners’ perception of language successes and failures based on the participants’ narratives?

1. Methods

3.1 Research design

This is a descriptive qualitative study, adopting a thematic content analysis as an approach. According to McLeod (2011), this approach is appropriate for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data. This design is considered suitable for the present study because it emphasizes the participants’ experiences and provide a fuller grasp of their attributional styles.

3.2 Setting and participants

The study is conducted in Federal universities in South-eastern geo-political zone of Nigeria. The population of the study comprised 104 300 Level French students studying French abroad for their immersion program during the first semester of 2024/2025 academic session. The invitation with the selection criteria was sent out to these French students who are currently doing their one-year study abroad immersion

program, through their course representatives and via their WhatsApp platform. Only 12 participants replied and consented to participate in the study. Therefore, these 12 participants who gave their consent became the primary participants for the study. Their participation is considered beneficial because they represented two different Federal universities within the South-eastern geopolitical zone of Nigeria.

Table 1 Participants

Participants (P's)	Gender	Age	School
French language history			
P1	F	19	NAU
learning French from Primary school			
P2	F	22	NAU
learning French from secondary school			
P3	M	22	NAU
learning French from university			
P4	M	23	NAU
learning French from secondary school			
P5	F	21	NAU
learning French from university			
P6	F	20	NAU
learning French from secondary school			
P7	M	21	NAU
learning French from primary school			
P8	F	19	UNN
learning French from secondary school			
P9	M	25	UNN
learning French from university			
P10	F	19	UNN
learning French from secondary school			
2) *NAU: Nnamdi Azikiwe University			
3) *UNN: University of Nsukka			
P11	F	21	UNN
learning French from university			
P12	F	22	UNN
learning French from secondary school			

3.3 Research Instruments

A semi-structured interview was used to obtain the data. The research instrument was divided into three sections developed by the researcher. The first section elicited the participants’ demographic information and language history. The second section comprised 3 interview questions that focused on how French third language learners attribute their language successes and failures, and the third section comprised 3 interview questions that focused on the role the participants’ age, gender, and family support play in their perception of language successes and failures. These interview questions were validated by experts.

Data Collection and Analysis

To collect the data, the researcher conducted three stages open-ended interviews. The aim was to seek (i) the participants’ demographic information and language history, (ii) how they attribute their language successes and failures,

and (iii) the role the participants' age, gender, and family support play in their perception of language successes and failures. To ensure flexibility and accessibility, the interviews were conducted online via WhatsApp depending on the participants' availability. Ten participants chose to respond to the interview questions in English language in order to avoid any misunderstanding and in order to be able to express themselves freely as they were not so fluent in French language. However, two other participants chose to respond to the interview questions in French language. The interview for every participant lasted from about 15 to 20 minutes.

To analyze the data, the researcher employed thematic content analysis approach with Weiner's (1974) attribution theory as the framework. For ethical reasons, the researcher sought the participants' consents before conducting the interviews. Next, the researcher transcribed and coded by adopting Lichtman's (2013) 3C's of data analysis: codes, category, and concept. First, the researcher read and analyzed each transcription. Next, the codes emerging from the data were noted and compiled into appropriate groups. These steps-built themes and once all codes were created, the researcher started to analyze them qualitatively. These were done manually by the researcher in order to identify the themes and patterns of the data. The results of the thematic analysis were interpreted in light of the research questions to obtain meaningful insights that allowed a deeper and clearer understanding of the participants' language experiences and perspectives. In addition to the data obtained from the interview, the researcher also used existing literature on students' attributional styles to increase the credibility of the findings and ensure a total understanding of the subject matter. Furthermore, the researcher also provided her own reflection and stand for having similar characteristics with the participants as a French third language speaker.

3. Findings and Discussion

Below are the findings that emerged from the data. In discussing the findings, P1, P2, P3 were employed by the researcher to uphold the participants' privacy.

5.1. French Third Language Learners' Attribution of their French Language Successes and Failures

This study uncovered three themes namely, efforts, ability and task difficulty. These themes explain how French third language learners attribute their French language successes and failures.

3.1.1 Efforts

This theme emphasizes activities, endeavors, tasks and practice as being manifested when students attribute the cause of their language learning successes and failures. For example, P7 who have experienced language success asserted;

"I felt particularly successful when I saw my second-year oral exams results and the main reasons for this success was due to intense learning and reading, and usage of the language more regularly"

This implies that students who attribute their success to internal factors such as efforts persistently practice and work hard to attain language proficiency. Likewise, P9 maintained; *"There have been moments I do feel successful in learning French and I think it's because of the efforts I put in, my time, my efforts, my energy"*

Also, for some language students, when they attribute their language success to the amount of effort they put in, they may attribute language difficulties and setbacks to a temporary lack of effort and might be motivated to improve (Gerace, 2020). P2 who have experienced language failure also confirmed;

"One of the reasons I feel like I have difficulties is maybe because I don't practice much. So, I am pretty sure that if I put in more practice which I actually do recently, I am going to learn more and stop being frustrated"

This is an indication that aside from making efforts, French third language learners who attribute the cause of their success or failure to efforts understand that the success and failures experienced are primarily due to unstable, temporary factors and can be improved. This is also in line with Weiner's (1974) attribution theory that efforts are internal-unstable attributions. This also aligns with Wang & Hall (2018)'s assertion that the efforts learners put in their academics can be regarded as an unstable attribution, because learners' efforts can vary from one situation to another.

Ability

Reflecting on her language journey, P1 started her narrative by highlighting her passion and love for French language. She went on to reveal that she started learning French from primary school till junior secondary school, before proceeding to learn it as a degree course in the university. P1 acknowledges that though learning French can be quite challenging sometimes, she has never experienced failures while learning the language.

"Yea, I am among the best in my class. The main reason for my success is, I think I learn fast. That's the main reason"

In Weiner's attribution theory (1974), when students attribute their academic successes and failures to their own personal ability, it is an internal-stable attribution. Also, students' attribution of success to their own ability could serve as a motivational factor that drives them to become better, successful and more confident language learners. This also aligns with Graham (2020)'s assertion that language students who consistently attribute their language success to their inherent ability and intelligence, and are likely to feel more confident in their language learning endeavors.

Task Difficulty

Compared to P1, P8 began learning French for the first time at the university level. He was taught with English language in primary and secondary schools. Though he comes from a family that speaks Igbo as their native language, he also learnt Hausa while growing up. Given that he speaks English, Igbo and Hausa, he considered himself a multilingual speaker and decided to add French to the list of languages he speaks. Learning French language for the first at the university level was not easy for P8 and when asked about his language learning success and failures, he asserted;

"The moment I felt very unsuccessful, frustrated was in my first semester, because that was the first time I was learning French. I guess the reason for my failure and difficulties was that that was the first time I was learning French. But from my end, I am trying best"

When learners attribute the cause of their language success and failures to external factors that are beyond their control such as task difficulty, it is an external attribution (Drew, 2023). Also, expressing his recent success in French language learning, he claimed;

"The particular time when I felt I was successful in French was in my second semester, First year. That time, I didn't know French. So, a lecturer actually called me and the person was like, wow; In first semester, I was so dull but now, I am doing very well. Lucky enough, I got almost 'Bs' in courses I had 'E'. So, that was a lot for me"

This is an indication that even though P9 encountered numerous difficulties during the first semester, given that he had just started learning French for the first time at the university level, he persisted in improving himself the next semester. This disagrees with Weiner's (1974) attribution theory that students who blame external factors such as task difficulty or luck are more likely to give up easily in the face of challenges.

5.2 Role of Sociodemographic on French Third Language Learners' Perception of Success and Failures

5.2.1 Age

Age is considered one of the sociodemographic variables that could contribute to differences in how students perceive their French language successes and failures. Using an illustration, P2 pointed out how age influences successes and failures in French language learning among older and younger learners;

"I am 22 years old and learning a new language at an advanced age is not as easy as it seems. It's a very hard job to do because you have to start from the very scratch, learning, writing, speaking and understanding, hearing and all those things. But, when you are learning at a very young age, it's actually very easy. So, I could say that age actually influences my success because it is not my mother tongue. As in, I have to start learning it from the scratch, and I hope I keep getting better each day" (P2)

P9 also offered a distinction between young and older language learners in how their age could play role in their language success:

"I am 19 years old. I believe that younger people have more advantage in speaking French because at young age, you are open to many things. You tend to learn easily and you tend to pick up things around you. At my age, there are challenges, and I am not in a French speaking environment".

The statements given by P2 and P9 give substance to the theoretical argument that there could be individual differences in students' attribution styles as a result of their age, indicating that younger language students, are more likely to attribute their language successes and failures to external variables such as task difficulty, luck or teaching

method when compared to older learners (Hahlin and Granfeldt, 2021). However, P2 and P9 maintained a slightly different position that older learners may perceive French language learning to be more difficult as to when compared with the younger learners.

In contrast, comments made by other participants in this study indicated that age does not influence how students perceive their French language successes and failures. For example, P1 asserted;

"I am 19 years old. My age doesn't influence how I perceive success. Normally, I just know that I am learning it well" (P1)

P8 further gave a statement that is slightly the same from what P1 claimed;

"I am 25 years old but my age doesn't influence how I perceive my French language success and failures. Me, I feel that age is just a number. So, it doesn't actually affect anything concerning my academics or how I view anything. My perspective of French is just normal with every other person". (P8)

It is assumed that the different viewpoints regarding how age influences French third language learners' perception of success and failures in their language endeavors could be as a result of individual differences among the participants.

5.2.2 Gender

Literature review findings have revealed that gender could be one of the contributory factors to individual differences in students' attribution styles (Ngunu, Kinai and Ndambuki, 2019). This suggest that as a result of their gender, French third language learners may perceive their language successes and failures differently. However, three participants in this present study disagreed with this stance and gave the following responses when asked how gender impacts their perception of success and failures in French language learning;

"My gender doesn't contribute to how I perceive success or failures in learning French" (P1)

"I do not think so. It is languages and languages are not biased when it comes to gender. So, learning language doesn't have to do with one's gender" (P4)

"No, gender has no importance. What's most important is the zeal to learn the language regardless of whether you are a male or a female. Everyone is capable of learning French language" (P11).

Also, the literature revealed that in some cultural contexts, some languages like French, which is frequently regarded as a "romantic" language may be seen as better suited for women (Li, Wang and Shen, 2024) and this could affect how male and female students approach language acquisition and attribute success or failure. P2 indicated agreement with this viewpoint;

"When you are a male and you say that you are studying French at the university as a degree course. The society sees you like you are not actually doing anything good with your time. And I think it favors the female gender more than the males, but then, that's life" (P2)

It could be deduced that the participants who gave their statements are demonstrating that the role of gender as a

contributory factor to language learners' perception of success and failures differ, be it based on their personal experiences and cultural expectations.

5.2.3 Family Support

Learning French as a degree course at the university level is not one of the professional courses most parents in Nigeria would want their children to study. This explains why family support could play a significant role in language learners' perception of success and failures. P9, when asked how family support can influence students' perception of their language success and failures expressed;

"My family are very much supportive, even though they would have loved me to go for a Science course. But, I am not very good at Maths, so they just let me do what I like doing and so, I found myself being a French student and they support me really well. Their support plays a huge role, a very huge role. Because if not for them, I don't know how I would be able to fund myself in school" (P9)

P4 also asserted;

"I am blessed to have a supportive family, as long as it is what I want to do, they are supportive regardless. But my dad doesn't think a French career is a good career because of how the situation of the country is. My mom explained to him the advantages and the work benefits and every other thing that involves money when it comes to learning French as a degree course at the university. I am looking forward to it" (P4)

P8 further gave a statement that aligns with P9 and P4;

"French is not the best course that I would have chosen because I really wanted to read law. It's not what everyone is happy with. But at least, I am doing well in it and everyone is actually rooting for me to see what I will actually become at the end of the day" (P8).

P9 also affirmed that;

"I believe that family support plays a very good role in your learning success and failures. For someone who has a lot of family support, they tend to get the motivation they need. Yes, they tend to get to learn with the motivation they need to learn the language. It actually helps when the parents put extra efforts to aid their children in learning language or doing anything or any career path they need to follow" (P9).

It is clear from these findings that the participants concur that French is not really the most preferred course that their parents would have loved them to study. However, the participants also pointed out that their family's support propels them to achieve success in learning the French language. This finding is in line with Roksa and Kinsley (2019)'s assertion that language learners are more likely to participate actively in classroom tasks as a result of their family support, thereby attributing their successes to collaborative efforts of family rather than individual capabilities.

4. Limitation of the Study

Though this present study provides valuable insights into the attributional patterns of French third language learners in Federal universities in South-East Nigeria, certain limitations affect the generalizability of its findings. First, the sample was limited to a particular institutional and geographic setting,

which restricted its generalizability to French language learners in other parts of Nigeria, private institutions, or other educational systems. Second, the study focused on a relatively small sample size, thereby limiting the range of viewpoints on how French third language learners' sociodemographic variables influence attribution styles. However, the fact that the results align with what is in the literature is an indication that the findings could have a far-reaching implication irrespective of the limited sample size. Another limitation of the study lies in its sole reliance on self-reported interview data, which while rich in narrative detail, may be subject to recall bias or social desirability effects.

Meanwhile, there are other ways of data collection methods, such as learning logs, classroom observations, or behavioral pattern analysis, which the present study did not employ, suggesting that the study could not provide a more comprehensive understanding of how French learners attribute their successes and failures in real-time learning scenarios. Future research could therefore incorporate these alternative approaches to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how French learners attribute their successes and failures in real-time learning scenarios.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

The aim of this qualitative study was to explore how French third language learners attribute their French language successes and failures. The study revealed that French third language learners attribute their languages successes and failures to their ability, efforts and task difficulty. Also, findings from the participants helped the researcher to draw holistic conclusions that sociodemographic variables such as age, gender and family support contribute to individual differences in how French third language learners perceive their language success and failures based on the participants' language **learning** narratives. Furthermore, this study underscores the significance of understanding attribution processes among French third language learners, and also reaffirms its relevance by advancing knowledge of attribution theory in multilingual language instruction. It also highlights the necessity of attribution-aware pedagogical strategies and institutional support networks that are tailored to French third language learners' socio-demographic contexts.

To further provide a more thorough knowledge of how French third language learners attribute their language success and failures and to better understand how their socio-demographic contribute to the individual differences in their attributional styles, the researcher recommends a future study that explores attributional patterns among a larger and more diverse population of French third language learners across various geo-political regions in Nigeria, including both Federal and state universities. Another important practice that the present study recommends is conducting longitudinal studies to monitor the attribution styles of French language learners over time. This will show how the perceptions of French third language learners evolve with increased exposure to the French language, especially in different instructional or motivational contexts.

Furthermore, the findings that French third language learners attribute their language successes and failures primarily to factors such as effort, ability, and task difficulty, evidently have significant implications for language teaching, curriculum design, and learner support strategies in Nigerian universities. For instance, when it comes to language teaching, French language instructors should emphasize effort-based feedback over ability-focused praise to reinforce the idea that progress in French is achievable through consistent practice. Also, French language teachers can integrate attribution training into lessons by encouraging French language students to reflect on their learning strategies through guided self-assessments or reflective journals. As per curriculum design, since some French students perceive task difficulty as a barrier, curricula should scaffold content, beginning with foundational skills before introducing complicated linguistic concepts. Additionally, to provide support strategies for French third language learners, particularly those with maladaptive attributions, academic counseling services, peer mentorship programs, and workshops educating parents on the career benefits of French proficiency should be made available. This is most likely to help the French third language learners to develop resilience and adaptive attributions in their language-learning journey.

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