

The Factors Influencing the Interaction between Professional Growth and Teaching Ability Development of Foreign Language Teachers of Higher Learning

Shi Mingming, Xu Yinxue, Xu Yi

School of Foreign Language, Chongqing University of Science and Technology, Chongqing, China

Abstract: *The relationship between the professional growth of foreign language teachers and their teaching ability development has always been the focus of academic attention. Based on SPSSAU online statistical software and questionnaires, this paper studies the interactive factors influencing the professional growth and teaching ability development of foreign language teachers of higher learning. The results show that (1) the professional growth and teaching ability development of foreign language teachers promote each other in many aspects, (2) The main internal factors that limit the professional growth of foreign language teachers are academic background, professional title and length of study, while the main external factors are heavy teaching tasks, poor research atmosphere and low income of teachers, (3) The internal factors that restrict the development of foreign language teachers' teaching ability are mainly the lack of scientific research ability and teaching communication and discussion, while the external factors are mainly related to whether Colleges and Universities can formulate active policies to provide effective communication and provide learning platform for teachers and effectively improve teachers' scientific research ability.*

Keywords: *professional growth, teaching ability development, internal and external factors*

1. Introduction

Foreign languages serve as crucial tools for international communication, technological advancements, and cultural exchanges. By learning and utilizing foreign languages, individuals can directly access cutting-edge scientific developments, managerial experiences, and ideological concepts from abroad, as well as gain insights into the world's outstanding cultures and civilizations. Furthermore, proficiency in foreign languages contributes to enhancing a nation's linguistic capabilities, effectively disseminating its cultural values, fostering extensive interactions with people from various countries, and elevating its soft power¹. Governments at all levels in China have consistently emphasized foreign language education, especially since the reform and opening-up era, driven by the nation's pressing demand for foreign language talents.

Despite the current emphasis on Chinese cultural confidence and the promotion of a Chinese academic perspective and discourse system, China's increasing national strength and its growing international responsibilities necessitate more foreign language talents. Consequently, the professional growth and teaching abilities of foreign language teachers in universities play a decisive role in achieving the goals of foreign language talent cultivation and ensuring the quality of foreign language education in China.

Therefore, research on the professional growth and teaching ability development of foreign language teachers in universities plays a proactive role in enhancing foreign language education quality and nurturing talents for international engagement. However, the relationship between teacher professional growth and teaching ability development still lacks sufficient attention, and related studies integrating the two are rare. The phenomenon of "research without teaching" or "teaching without research" remains widespread. On one hand, those focused on professional growth believe that theoretical knowledge cannot be integrated with teaching practice, and they disdain using theory to guide teaching, considering it as disrespecting the theory itself. On the other hand, those focused on teaching ability development argue that theoretical knowledge is impractical and hollow, emphasizing that only skills matter in teaching, sometimes even turning classrooms into performance stages to

showcase their own skills[1-5].

At the same time, current research still remains at the surface level, asserting that a teacher's theoretical proficiency determines their teaching ability, lacking in-depth exploration of the intrinsic relationship between teacher professional growth and teaching ability development. As pointed out by Shu Dingfang², in recent years, universities have set high requirements for teacher development and increased investment, adopting various forms of teacher training. However, these requirements and training often overly emphasize the improvement of theoretical knowledge, using application projects and publication of articles as crucial indicators of teacher development, neglecting the enhancement of teachers' actual teaching abilities, and lacking discussion on the intrinsic relationship between professional growth and teaching ability development. This paper intends to explore the relationship between professional growth and teaching ability development of foreign language teachers and their constraining factors through questionnaire surveys, aiming to provide some reference for academia.

2. Overview of Existing Research on Professional Growth and teaching ability development

Research on teacher professional growth started relatively late in China, with its origins traced back to the 1990s^{3 4}. Unfortunately, studies focusing on foreign language teachers' professional growth emerged a decade later. In contrast, research on teaching ability development is relatively more abundant. However, studies integrating both professional growth and teaching ability development are scarce. Therefore, research that combines professional growth and teaching ability development can only be indirectly reflected through relevant studies of one or the other. Here, we primarily outline existing research on professional growth and teaching ability development by examining studies related to the professional growth of foreign language teachers. Specifically, research related to teaching ability development mainly focuses on four aspects: the essence of professional growth, influencing factors, stage characteristics, and growth strategies.

Firstly, regarding the essence of professional growth in foreign language teachers, current research has generally reached a consensus on the conceptual definition of professional growth. Although there are various expressions for "professional growth of foreign language teachers," the concept generally revolves around two main lines of inquiry: exploring the professional growth of foreign language teachers from both a psychological perspective and a perspective of continuing education^{5 6}. However, professional knowledge and skills remain the core content of professional growth for foreign language teachers, with fewer studies addressing aspects such as professional attitudes, motivations, self-professional growth needs, and awareness from a psychological perspective. For foreign language teacher education in China, attention should be paid to teachers' knowledge, skills, attitudes, and awareness⁷.

Secondly, concerning the analysis of factors influencing the professional growth of foreign language teachers, most scholars believe that there are internal and external factors. The former refers to self-improvement triggered by teachers' self-role desires, needs, practices, and pursuits, while the latter stems from objective needs arising from social progress and educational development for the improvement of teacher roles and behaviors^{8 9}. However, due to the different influencing factors on individual professional growth and the diverse states of teacher professional growth, there is an urgent need for large-scale studies to identify some regular factors constraining teacher growth.

Thirdly, teachers have different levels of professional growth, needs, attitudes, beliefs, etc., at different stages of development. Understanding the stages of teacher professional growth helps teachers clarify their own paths of professional growth¹⁰. These studies have clarified the stages of professional growth for English teachers in Chinese universities and their characteristics, which not only enable teacher educators to take targeted measures to promote and accelerate the process of new and prospective teachers adapting to teaching but also help teachers see their professional growth as a process from the beginning of their teaching career, avoiding frustration due to temporary difficulties, and helping new teachers build confidence and improve their teaching effectiveness systematically and progressively, broaden their horizons, and deepen their understanding of teaching.

Fourthly, regarding professional growth strategies, there are currently 11 popular teacher learning strategies used in language teacher education and development internationally (teacher workshops, self-supervision, teacher collaboration, teaching notes, peer observation, teaching portfolios, incident analysis, case studies, peer coaching, team teaching, and action research), mainly manifested in three aspects: workshops, team teaching, and self-supervision^{11 12 13 14 15 16 17}.

In summary, the current research lacks sufficient attention to the actual teaching abilities of foreign language teachers in universities and lacks research on the intrinsic interactive relationship and influencing factors between the professional growth and teaching ability development of foreign language teachers in universities[6-9].

3. Research Design

3.1 Research Questions

Considering the deficiencies mentioned above in current research, this study aims to explore the internal and external factors constraining the professional growth and teaching ability development of foreign language teachers, focusing primarily on the following two questions:

(1) What is the relationship between the professional growth and teaching ability development of foreign language teachers?

(2) What are the internal and external factors constraining the professional growth and teaching ability development of foreign language teachers?

3.2 Research Participants

The survey targets foreign language teachers in universities, primarily from second-tier institutions located in regions such as Northeast, North China, Southeast, and Southwest. Foreign language teachers include those teaching public foreign languages and those teaching specialized foreign languages.

3.3 Research Tools

The questionnaire used in this study is developed and designed by the author. The questionnaire comprises three main sections, all containing closed-ended questions, including: Personal information survey of foreign language teachers (Questions 1-9), which consists of multiple-choice questions; Investigation of external factors influencing teacher professional growth and teaching ability development (Questions 10-13), which includes multiple-choice questions; Survey questionnaire on the professional growth and teaching ability development of foreign language teachers (Questions 14-38).

The questionnaire on teacher professional growth covers four aspects: professional knowledge, skills, awareness, and attitudes, while the questionnaire on teaching ability development is designed based on four dimensions: teaching preparation ability, teaching execution ability, teaching evaluation ability, and teaching reflection ability. Each dimension includes 3-4 questions, and the Likert five-point scale is used for response options, where option A represents strongly disagree and option E represents strongly agree. The author employs the method of repeated measurements and utilizes SPSSAU to investigate the reliability and validity of the questionnaire. The results show that the reliability coefficient Cronbach's $\alpha=0.908$, indicating high reliability of the questionnaire. The reliability coefficients for teacher professional growth and teaching ability development range from 0.856 to 0.964, indicating high reliability of the questionnaires for both aspects. Additionally, the KMO and Bartlett tests show a KMO value of 0.815, which is greater than 0.8, indicating good validity of the questionnaires, suitable for information extraction and analysis.

3.4 Data Collection and Analysis

The questionnaire is distributed through online platforms, initially imported into Questionnaire Star and then distributed via WeChat and QQ. A total of 89 questionnaires were collected, all of which were verified to be valid after careful examination. Finally, SPSSAU online analysis software is used for data statistics and processing. Through statistical analysis of the questionnaire data, the internal and external factors constraining the professional growth and teaching ability development of foreign language teachers are explored. Firstly, the relationship between individual differences of teachers and their professional growth and teaching ability development is analyzed, followed by an investigation of the correlation between the professional growth and teaching ability development of foreign language teachers. Subsequently, in the analysis and discussion section, the internal and external factors influencing the professional growth and teaching ability development of foreign language teachers are explored[10-13].

4. Analysis of the Relationship between Foreign Language Teachers' Professional Growth and teaching ability development

4.1 Relationship between Individual Differences of Foreign Language Teachers and Professional Growth and teaching ability development

The author conducted a study on the relationship between individual differences of foreign language teachers and their professional growth and teaching ability development using SPSSAU, and the results are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Relationship between Individual Differences and Professional Growth and teaching ability development

		Professional Growth	teaching ability development
Gender	Correlation Coefficient	-0.145	0.121
	p-value	0.174	0.259
Age	Correlation Coefficient	-0.044	0.093
	p-value	0.683	0.388
Teaching Experience	Correlation Coefficient	-0.085	0.065
	p-value	0.428	0.547
Education	Correlation Coefficient	0.437**	-0.026
	p-value	0.000	0.809
Degree	Correlation Coefficient	0.439**	-0.031
	p-value	0.000	0.776
Major	Correlation Coefficient	0.043	0.169
	p-value	0.687	0.114
Title	Correlation Coefficient	0.221*	0.149
	p-value	0.037	0.162
Courses Taught	Correlation Coefficient	-0.090	-0.035
	p-value	0.399	0.746
Weekly Reading Time	Correlation Coefficient	0.321**	0.047
	p-value	0.002	0.662
* p<0.05 ** p<0.01			

From Table 1, it can be observed that using correlation analysis to study professional growth and teaching ability development, there are correlations between gender, age, teaching experience, education, degree, major, title, courses taught, and the time spent reading foreign language books and academic journals per week. The results are as follows:

For professional growth, the Pearson correlation values between gender, age, teaching experience, major, and courses taught are approximately -0.145, -0.044, -0.085, 0.043, and -0.090, respectively, all close to zero, and the p-values are all greater than 0.05 (0.174/0.683, 0.428, 0.687, 0.399), indicating no significant correlation between professional growth and gender, age, teaching experience, or courses taught. However, the Pearson correlation values between education, degree, title, and the time spent reading foreign language books and academic journals per week are 0.437, 0.439, 0.221, and 0.321, respectively, and the p-values are all less than 0.01 or 0.05 (0.00, 0.00, 0.037, 0.002), indicating significant correlations between professional growth and education, degree, title, and the time spent reading foreign language books and academic journals per week.

For teaching ability development, the Pearson correlation values between gender, age, teaching experience, education, degree, title, major, courses taught, and weekly reading time are all close to zero, ranging from 0.121 to -0.035, and the p-values are all greater than 0.05 (0.259, 0.388, 0.547, 0.809, 0.776, 0.114, 0.162, 0.746, 0.662), indicating no significant correlation between teaching ability development and these factors.

In summary, among the individual differences of foreign language teachers in universities, education, degree, title, and the time spent reading specialized books and academic journals per week are correlated with professional growth, while gender, age, teaching experience, and courses taught are not correlated with professional growth. Additionally, none of the dimensions of individual differences

among university foreign language teachers are correlated with teaching ability development.

4.2 Foreign Language Teachers' Professional Growth and teaching ability development

The author conducted a study on the correlation between the professional growth and teaching ability development of foreign language teachers using SPSSAU, and the results are shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Correlation between Professional Growth and teaching ability development

(Pearson Correlation - Standard Format)				
	Teaching implementation	Teaching Preparation	Teaching Appraisal	Teaching Reflection
Professional Knowledge	0.213*	0.280**	0.154	0.150
Professional Skills	0.285**	0.225*	0.305**	0.123
Professional Awareness	0.265*	0.256*	0.349**	0.244*
Professional Attitude	0.126	0.121	0.151	0.132
* $p < 0.05$ ** $p < 0.01$				

The correlation between the four dimensions of teaching ability development (Teaching Implementation, Teaching Preparation, Teaching Appraisal, Teaching Reflection) and the four dimensions of professional growth (Professional Knowledge, Professional Skills, Professional Awareness, Professional Attitude) was analyzed using Pearson's correlation coefficient. The results are as follows:

Teaching Implementation: Significant positive correlations were found with Professional Knowledge (0.213), Professional Skills (0.285), and Professional Awareness (0.265), indicating that Teaching Implementation is positively correlated with these aspects of professional growth. However, no significant correlation was observed with Professional Attitude (0.126).

Teaching Preparation: Significant positive correlations were found with Professional Knowledge (0.280), Professional Skills (0.225), and Professional Awareness (0.256), indicating that Teaching Preparation is positively correlated with these aspects of professional growth. No significant correlation was observed with Professional Attitude (0.121).

Teaching Appraisal: Significant positive correlations were found with Professional Skills (0.305) and Professional Awareness (0.349), indicating that Teaching Appraisal is positively correlated with these aspects of professional growth. However, no significant correlation was observed with Professional Knowledge and Professional Attitude.

Teaching Reflection: A significant positive correlation was found with Professional Awareness (0.244), indicating that Teaching Reflection is positively correlated with this aspect of professional growth. However, no significant correlation was observed with Professional Knowledge, Professional Skills, and Professional Attitude.

In conclusion, there are positive correlations between Professional Knowledge, Professional Skills, Professional Awareness, and Professional Attitude in professional growth and Teaching Preparation, Teaching Implementation, Teaching Appraisal, and Teaching Reflection in teaching ability development. This suggests a bidirectional and mutually reinforcing relationship between professional growth and teaching ability development in various aspects[14-17].

5. Analysis of Internal and External Factors Limiting the Professional Growth and teaching ability development of Foreign Language Teachers

5.1 Impact of Internal Factors on the "Professional Growth" and "teaching ability development" of Foreign Language Teachers

According to the analysis above, the internal factors influencing the "professional growth" and "teaching ability development" of foreign language teachers mainly manifest in individual differences, including gender, age, teaching experience, education level, academic degree, major, title, courses

taught, and time spent reading foreign language professional books and journals. The study found no significant correlation between internal factors of foreign language teachers and teaching ability development. This indicates that the differences in internal factors of foreign language teachers have little impact on teaching ability development. Additionally, differences in gender, age, teaching experience, and courses taught have no significant effect on professional development. However, differences in education level, academic degree, title, and time spent reading professional books and journals show a significant positive correlation with professional growth. This suggests that the higher the education level and academic degree, and the longer the time spent reading professional books and journals, the higher the speed and quality of professional growth.

Therefore, for foreign language teachers to enhance their professional competence and research ability, they can consciously improve their educational qualifications, actively pursue title assessments based on the criteria, and pay attention to research trends in related fields during leisure time. Moreover, they should read more books and journals related to research to enhance their professional knowledge, skills, awareness, and attitude.

Additionally, in terms of teaching ability development, although individual differences in the listed items have no significant impact, a survey on the subjective reasons affecting teaching ability development (Table 3) revealed significant differences among foreign language teachers ($\chi^2=22.229$, $p=0.000<0.05$). Specifically, the response rates and prevalence rates for inadequate research ability (response rate: 23.85%, prevalence rate: 58.43%) and encouragement for teachers to discuss with each other (response rate: 29.82%, prevalence rate: 73.03%) were significantly higher. This indicates that foreign language teachers generally acknowledge the significant influence of inadequate research ability and peer discussion on their teaching ability development. In contrast, a minority of foreign language teachers are affected by factors such as lack of understanding of development methods, job dissatisfaction, and feeling that everyone is similar and they can manage. This suggests that the majority of foreign language teachers have a good understanding of teaching ability development methods, maintain a positive attitude towards work, and do not represent the mainstream with a negative attitude towards teaching ability development.

Table 3: Subjective Reasons Affecting Your teaching ability development (Multiple Options)

Items	Response		Prevalence Rate (n=89)
	n	Response Rate	
A. Feel that everyone is similar, can manage on my own	25	11.47%	28.09%
B. Lack of understanding of development methods	42	19.27%	47.19%
C. Job dissatisfaction	34	15.60%	38.20%
D. Inadequate research ability	52	23.85%	58.43%
E. Encouragement for teachers to discuss with each other	65	29.82%	73.03%
Total	218	100%	244.94%
Goodness-of-fit test: $\chi^2=22.229$, $p=0.000$			

Table 4: Qualities Qualified Undergraduate Foreign Language Teachers Should Possess (Multiple Options)

Items	Response		Prevalence Rate (n=89)
	n	Response Rate	
A. Solid basic language skills in listening, speaking, reading, writing, and translation, especially fluent oral skills	87	19.42%	97.75%
B. Strong research abilities, especially in foreign language teaching research	74	16.52%	83.15%
C. Proficiency in intercultural communication knowledge, with strong intercultural communication awareness and abilities	73	16.29%	82.02%
D. Mastery of foreign language teaching theories, with continuous reflection on teaching	73	16.29%	82.02%
E. Awareness of professional development and lifelong learning	79	17.63%	88.76%
F. Familiarity with multimedia foreign language teaching	62	13.84%	69.66%
Total	448	100%	503.37%
Goodness-of-fit test: $\chi^2=4.518$, $p=0.477$			

In the survey regarding "What qualities do you think qualified undergraduate foreign language teachers should possess," the author found consistency among foreign language teachers regarding the qualities that qualified foreign language teachers should possess (Table 4).

Table 4 shows that foreign language teachers generally believe that qualified undergraduate foreign language teachers should first possess solid basic language skills in listening, speaking, reading, writing, and translation, especially fluent oral skills (response rate: 19.42%, prevalence rate: 97.75%). Secondly, they should have an awareness of professional development and lifelong learning (response rate: 17.63%, prevalence rate: 88.76%). Thirdly, they should have strong research abilities, especially in foreign language teaching research (response rate: 16.52%, prevalence rate: 83.15%). They should also have mastery of foreign language teaching theories, with continuous reflection on teaching (response rate: 16.29%, prevalence rate: 82.02%), proficiency in intercultural communication knowledge, with strong intercultural communication awareness and abilities (response rate: 16.29%, prevalence rate: 82.02%), and lastly, familiarity with multimedia foreign language teaching (response rate: 13.84%, prevalence rate: 69.66%). The response rates and prevalence rates of each item are generally high, indicating that foreign language teachers have a certain consensus on the qualities that qualified undergraduate foreign language teachers should possess. Therefore, to improve their own professional competence and teaching ability development, foreign language teachers need to start from themselves and enhance their professional competence and teaching ability from various aspects.

5.2 Impact of External Factors on the "Professional Growth" and "teaching ability development" of Foreign Language Teachers

Firstly, regarding the impact on the professional growth of foreign language teachers, external factors mainly involve teaching tasks, income status, research atmosphere, and teacher status. In the survey regarding "What objective reasons hinder your teaching ability development," foreign language teachers' opinions on external objective factors affecting their professional growth showed significant differences ($\chi^2=22.778$, $p=0.000<0.05$) (Table 5). Among them, the high workload of teaching tasks and insufficient time (response rate: 36.23%, prevalence rate: 84.27%), lack of research atmosphere (response rate: 27.05%, prevalence rate: 62.92%), and low teacher income (response rate: 23.67%, prevalence rate: 55.06%) had relatively high response rates and prevalence rates. This indicates that among all the objective factors affecting professional growth, foreign language teachers generally believe that heavy teaching tasks, poor academic atmosphere, and low teacher income are the main reasons affecting their professional growth.

Table 5: Objective Reasons Hindering Your Professional Growth

Items	Response		Prevalence Rate (n=89)
	n	Response Rate	
A. Heavy teaching tasks, insufficient time	75	36.23%	84.27%
B. Low teacher income	49	23.67%	55.06%
C. Lack of research atmosphere	56	27.05%	62.92%
D. Low teacher status	27	13.04%	30.34%
Total	207	100%	232.58%
Goodness-of-fit test: $\chi^2=22.778$, $p=0.000$			

Table 6: What Should Colleges and Universities Do to Promote Teachers' teaching ability development?

Items	Response		Prevalence Rate (n=89)
	n	Response Rate	
A. Encourage teacher discussions	65	25.59%	73.03%
B. Seek expert guidance	60	23.62%	67.42%
C. Formulate policies for incentives	67	26.38%	75.28%
D. Enhance academic research capabilities	60	23.62%	67.42%
E. Let things take their course	2	0.79%	2.25%
Total	254	100%	285.39%
Goodness-of-fit test: $\chi^2=59.346$, $p=0.000$			

Next, regarding the impact on the teaching ability development of foreign language teachers,

external factors mainly involve efforts made by Colleges and Universities in teacher discussions, expert guidance, policy formulation, academic research, and other aspects. In the survey regarding "What do you think Colleges and Universities should do to promote teachers' teaching ability development," foreign language teachers' opinions on school factors related to teaching ability development showed significant differences ($\chi^2=59.346$, $p=0.000<0.05$) (Table 6). Among them, foreign language teachers believe that Colleges and Universities play a positive role in promoting teachers' teaching ability development by formulating incentive policies (response rate: 26.38%, prevalence rate: 75.28%), encouraging teacher discussions (response rate: 25.59%, prevalence rate: 73.03%), seeking expert guidance (response rate: 23.62%, prevalence rate: 67.42%), and enhancing academic research capabilities (response rate: 23.62%, prevalence rate: 67.42%).

In summary, the professional growth and teaching ability development of foreign language teachers depend greatly on the support and encouragement from both Colleges and Universities and society. However, currently, in terms of professional growth, foreign language teachers commonly report issues such as excessive teaching tasks, insufficient time, low teacher remuneration, and a need for a stronger academic atmosphere. Therefore, to enhance the research and academic abilities of foreign language teachers, Colleges and Universities should consider efforts to alleviate teachers' workload, enhance the academic atmosphere of foreign language teaching research, and improve the salary and benefits for foreign language teachers. Additionally, in terms of teaching ability development, Colleges and Universities should formulate proactive policies to guide and incentivize teachers to enhance their teaching abilities, facilitate communication and exchange among foreign language teachers, invite experts for teaching guidance, and simultaneously enhance teachers' academic research capabilities. Only through these measures can Colleges and Universities provide effective support for the professional growth and teaching ability development of foreign language teachers.

6. Conclusion

Through the analysis above, it has been found that the professional growth of foreign language teachers is positively correlated with their teaching ability development in various aspects. For instance, professional knowledge significantly influences teaching preparation and execution abilities, while professional skills have a notable impact on teaching preparation, execution, and evaluation abilities. Additionally, professional awareness demonstrates a significant influence on teaching preparation, execution, evaluation, and reflection. The study also reveals that the teaching preparation ability of university foreign language teachers is positively correlated with professional knowledge, enhanced professional skills, and professional awareness. Teaching execution ability is positively correlated with professional knowledge, skills, and awareness. Teaching evaluation ability has a positive correlation with professional skills and awareness, while teaching reflection ability is positively correlated with professional awareness. Internal factors limiting the professional growth of foreign language teachers mainly include educational background, professional titles, and the duration of reading professional books and journals, while external factors mainly include heavy teaching tasks, insufficient time, lack of research atmosphere, and low teacher income. Internal factors limiting the teaching ability development of foreign language teachers mainly include insufficient research ability and inadequate communication and discussion with other teachers, while external factors, as revealed by the study, show that the formulation of incentive policies, encouragement of teacher collaboration, expert guidance, and enhancement of academic research capabilities play a positive role in promoting teaching ability development.

Therefore, comprehensive improvement of the professional literacy of foreign language teachers, especially in terms of professional knowledge, skills, and awareness, has a significant impact on the development of foreign language teaching. For foreign language teachers, besides teaching, it is crucial to enhance their professional literacy and research capabilities. Colleges and Universities should also guide and incentivize teacher collaboration through policy measures, establish research teams, and improve the overall research capabilities and scientific literacy of foreign language teachers. Education policy makers can contribute to enhancing the research capabilities and scientific literacy of foreign language teachers by raising their income levels and social status.

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