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Overcoming Barriers: Challenges and Strategies for Indigenous Learners in Bangladesh to Acquire English as a Third Language

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A B S T R A C T

Indigenous communities in Bangladesh, including the Chakma, Marma, Tripura, Manipuri, and Garo, face substantial challenges in acquiring English as their third language, with Bengali serving as their second language. The transition from their native oral languages to Bengali presents significant barriers, which are further compounded when learning English due to differences in syntax, pronunciation, and script. Socio-economic marginalization, inadequate access to quality education, and cultural stigmatization exacerbate these challenges, limiting their opportunities for academic and professional advancement. This study explores the linguistic, educational, and socio-cultural obstacles indigenous learners face in mastering English, focusing on factors such as inadequate teaching methods, lack of multilingual resources, technological barriers, and socio-environmental constraints. It also examines how the sequential nature of language acquisition—learning Bengali before English—places indigenous students at a comparative disadvantage. The findings emphasize the need for bilingual and multilingual education systems, culturally inclusive teaching practices, and policies that address the unique challenges faced by indigenous learners. By identifying these barriers and proposing actionable solutions, this research aims to contribute to a more equitable and inclusive education system in Bangladesh that empowers indigenous communities while preserving their linguistic and cultural identities.

Keywords: Indigenous Education, English as a Third Language, Language Acquisition Challenges, Multilingual Learning, Bangladesh Linguistic Equity

INTRODUCTION

In Bangladesh, indigenous communities such as the Chakma, Marma, Tripura, Manipuri, and Garo enrich the country's cultural and linguistic diversity. However, these communities face significant challenges in navigating the mainstream education system due to linguistic barriers. While Bengali is the national language and serves as their second language, English—the third language in this sequence—is increasingly important for academic achievement, social mobility, and global competitiveness. This sequential language learning process creates complex hurdles for indigenous learners, who must first achieve proficiency in Bengali before tackling English.

The difficulties of learning English are rooted in several factors. Indigenous languages are predominantly oral, often lacking written systems, standardized grammar, or phonetic scripts. This creates a stark contrast with Bengali and English, both of which require learners to master distinct alphabets, syntax, and pronunciation rules. Additionally, the socio-economic marginalization of indigenous communities limits their access to quality education, multilingual teaching resources, and experienced educators. Cultural stigmatization, geographic isolation, and insufficient technological infrastructure further hinder their ability to learn English effectively.

This paper seeks to examine the multifaceted challenges faced by indigenous learners in acquiring English as a third language in Bangladesh. It highlights linguistic, educational, and socio-cultural factors contributing to these difficulties and explores the systemic inequalities that perpetuate these barriers. By addressing these issues, the study underscores the importance of inclusive language policies, culturally responsive pedagogy, and targeted interventions to ensure that indigenous learners have equitable opportunities to succeed in learning English while preserving their cultural and linguistic heritage.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The acquisition of English as a third language by indigenous learners in Bangladesh presents a complex set of challenges rooted in linguistic, educational, and socio-cultural factors. Understanding these challenges requires a thorough review of relevant literature, which highlights the interplay between linguistic diversity, educational access, and socio-cultural dynamics in the context of Bangladesh.

Linguistic Challenges

The primary linguistic challenge faced by indigenous learners in Bangladesh arises from the stark differences between their native languages and English. Indigenous languages like Chakma, Marma, and Garo follow distinct phonological and syntactic rules compared to Bengali, the national language, which

is already their second language. According to Cummins' (1984) "Interdependence Hypothesis," proficiency in a learner's first language supports second language acquisition, yet for indigenous learners, the transition to English can be particularly challenging due to significant linguistic discontinuities. This is exacerbated by the oral nature of many indigenous languages, which lack formal alphabets and standard grammatical structures, making the switch to a written language like English more difficult (Spolsky, 2004).

Studies by Paulston and Bruder (1976) emphasize the impact of phonological and syntactical differences, noting that learners from non-literate backgrounds often struggle to grasp the complex rules of a second language. This phenomenon is relevant to the indigenous students in Bangladesh who, despite learning Bengali, find it difficult to shift their linguistic orientation to English. Pinker (2007) highlights that cognitive processes developed in the first language do not easily transfer to a new language, thereby complicating the acquisition of English. This theory aligns with the experiences of indigenous learners in Bangladesh who face cognitive dissonance when attempting to learn English, as their foundational linguistic skills in Bengali do not seamlessly translate.

Socio-Cultural Barriers

Socio-cultural factors also significantly influence the learning of English. Bourdieu's (1977) theory of cultural capital posits that linguistic and cultural marginalization affects one's ability to succeed in education. Indigenous learners often encounter societal stigmatization and exclusion from mainstream educational systems due to their cultural backgrounds (Spolsky, 2004). This cultural marginalization creates barriers to learning English because it diminishes learners' motivation and access to resources, as noted by Baker (2006). The reluctance to take risks in learning new languages due to fear of embarrassment or failure also plays a role, as highlighted by Pinker (2007).

Clyne (2003) discusses the importance of culturally responsive pedagogies in overcoming these barriers. He argues that teaching methods must incorporate the cultural contexts and linguistic experiences of indigenous learners to foster engagement and motivation. This approach is crucial for improving English language acquisition among these students, as it helps bridge the gap between their cultural identities and the demands of the English language curriculum.

Educational Challenges

Educational infrastructure and resources are critical factors in the acquisition of English. Surendran (2005) and Warschauer (2000) emphasize the role of technology in enhancing language learning, yet many indigenous schools in Bangladesh lack access to such resources. The absence of multimedia learning tools, consistent internet access, and quality teaching aids creates significant barriers for these learners. Moreover, geographical isolation in rural areas further restricts their exposure to English outside of the classroom, as argued by Selinger (1997). This isolation hinders opportunities for supplementary learning and practice, which are crucial for acquiring proficiency in English.

The lack of effective course conductors and skilled teachers who can adapt their teaching methods to the needs of indigenous learners exacerbates these challenges. Teachers often struggle to provide relevant, culturally sensitive instruction that acknowledges the linguistic differences of their students (Lewis & Baker, 2012). Overemphasis on grammar instruction at the expense of communication skills, as highlighted by Clyne (2003), also limits the effectiveness of English language teaching. The learning process in many indigenous schools becomes overly rigid, focusing more on rote learning and formal instruction rather than communicative competence, which is vital for mastering English.

Economic and Political Challenges

Economic barriers further complicate English acquisition for indigenous learners. The high costs associated with private tutoring and additional learning resources create disparities between indigenous students and their peers from wealthier backgrounds (Clyne, 2003). Additionally, political and policy gaps are evident in the inconsistent support from the government for bilingual and multilingual education initiatives (Spolsky, 2004). Policies are often not tailored to address the specific needs of indigenous learners, leading to systemic disadvantages in accessing quality education.

Community-based learning opportunities are also limited, which is crucial for language acquisition. Indigenous learners typically have fewer opportunities for informal language practice outside of the classroom, which is essential for becoming proficient in English. The absence of supportive learning environments both inside and outside schools contributes to the slow progress and loss of motivation among these students (Selinger, 1997)

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative exploratory research design to examine the linguistic, educational, and socio-cultural challenges faced by indigenous learners in acquiring English as their third language. A qualitative approach is ideal for capturing the nuanced personal experiences, cultural contexts, and systemic barriers encountered by these communities. By focusing on narrative data, this research aims to provide an in-depth understanding of the lived realities of indigenous learners.

Study Area and Population

The study targets indigenous communities in Bangladesh, including the Chakma, Marma, Tripura, Manipuri, and Garo, selected for their unique linguistic traditions and socio-economic vulnerabilities. These communities are situated in geographically distinct and often marginalized regions.

Sample Size

A purposive sample of 30 participants was selected, comprising: 15 indigenous students (aged 12–18) learning English as a third language. 10 educators teaching in indigenous or mainstream schools. 5 community leaders to provide broader socio-cultural insights.

Data Collection Methods

To ensure a comprehensive understanding, multiple data collection methods were employed: Semi-Structured Interviews

Participants: Indigenous students, teachers, and community leaders.

Sample Questions:

- *What difficulties do you face when learning English?*

- *How do you practice English outside the classroom?*

- *What kind of support do you receive from teachers or your community?*

Classroom Observations

Conducted in schools to assess teaching practices, resource availability, and student engagement in English language learning.

Focus Areas:

- Use of English in instruction.

- Student participation in English learning activities.

- Teacher strategies for addressing linguistic diversity.

Ethical Considerations

a. Informed Consent:

All participants were fully informed about the study's objectives, and their voluntary consent was obtained prior to data collection.

b. Cultural Sensitivity:

Efforts were made to respect the linguistic and cultural contexts of the participants, including the use of interpreters where necessary and ensuring that cultural norms were upheld during interactions.

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

This study reveals a complex web of challenges faced by indigenous learners in Bangladesh in acquiring English as their third language, shaped by linguistic, educational, socio-cultural, and systemic factors. The findings underscore the critical interplay of individual, institutional, and societal barriers that hinder their progress.

1. Linguistic Challenges

Indigenous languages are predominantly oral, creating a significant gap when transitioning to English, which demands mastery of its alphabet, pronunciation, and grammar.

Learners struggle with code-switching between their native languages, Bengali, and English, leading to cognitive overload and slower learning progress.

The influence of traditional linguistic patterns, including accents and syntax from indigenous languages, interferes with English language acquisition.

2. Educational Barriers

Classmates and Peer Influence: While peers can aid language learning, negative peer dynamics, such as discrimination or lack of encouragement, often demotivate indigenous learners.

Poor Course Conductors and Teaching Methods: Teachers' lack of training in multilingual and culturally inclusive methods limits effective English instruction.

Monolingual Learning Materials: Limited availability of bilingual or multilingual resources alienates indigenous students from the curriculum.

Overemphasis on Grammar: Teaching methods that prioritize rote memorization of grammar rules rather than practical communication further impede learning.

Limited Extracurricular Opportunities: A lack of engaging activities in English, such as debate clubs or storytelling sessions, reduces practical exposure.

3. Socio-Cultural Factors

Cultural Identity and Resistance: Indigenous learners often resist adopting English due to its perceived association with cultural and linguistic homogenization.

Stigma and Marginalization: Social biases, including classroom discrimination and societal stigmatization, hinder confidence and participation.

Seasonal Cultural Practices: Periodic community rituals and practices disrupt regular school attendance, impacting continuity in learning.

Gender Disparities: Girls in indigenous communities face additional restrictions and biases, limiting their exposure to and practice of English.

Community-Based Learning: Limited community-led initiatives or support for English learning creates a gap in localized educational opportunities.

4. Infrastructural and Technological Barriers

Poor Network Areas: Limited internet connectivity in remote regions restricts access to online resources, such as educational videos or language learning apps.

Technological Barriers: Indigenous learners often lack access to computers, smartphones, or language software necessary for digital learning.

Geographical Isolation: Residing in remote areas far from urban centers limits access to quality schools, libraries, and extracurricular opportunities.

Environmental Disruptions: Natural disasters and environmental instability in hill tracts often disrupt learning routines and infrastructure.

5. Psychological and Motivational Barriers

Leadership and Motivation Deficits: The absence of inspiring role models or mentors from within the community affects learners' drive to pursue English.

Reluctance to Take Risks: Fear of making mistakes or being ridiculed deters active practice of English.

Loss of Motivation: Slow progress in learning English, coupled with low self-esteem, leads to disinterest and disengagement.

Mental Health Challenges: Anxiety and stress arising from marginalization, academic pressures, or poor support systems further affect learning.

6. Socio-Economic Barriers

Economic Constraints: Many families prioritize immediate economic survival over education, limiting investment in resources like books or private tutoring.

Family Responsibilities: Learners, especially older children, are burdened with household duties, reducing the time available for studying.

Seasonal Migration and Displacement: Families migrating for work disrupt children's education and continuity in learning English.

7. Systemic and Policy Issues

Inconsistent Government Support: Policies for indigenous education often lack follow-through or adequate funding, creating resource gaps.

Political and Policy Gaps: The absence of targeted programs for indigenous communities perpetuates inequalities in access to quality English education.

Lack of Educational Autonomy: Centralized curricula fail to address the specific linguistic and cultural needs of indigenous students.

Limited Language Testing Accommodations: Standardized exams do not consider the unique challenges faced by indigenous learners, affecting their performance.

Historical Distrust of Mainstream Education: Past policies of cultural assimilation have led to skepticism towards adopting new languages like English.

8. Broader Social Dynamics

Overlapping Linguistic Hierarchies: The societal preference for Bengali and English over indigenous languages creates an implicit devaluation of native tongues, leading to identity conflicts.

Impact of Regional Dialects: Variations within indigenous dialects further complicate the standardization of English learning methods.

Parental Involvement: Parents' inability to assist with English, either due to illiteracy or language barriers, reduces at-home learning support.

Peer-Led Discrimination: Indigenous students are often subjected to ridicule for their accents or slower learning pace, affecting their confidence and willingness to engage.

DISCUSSION

Linguistic Dimensions

The transition from oral indigenous languages to English is particularly daunting due to the absence of a written script in many indigenous tongues. This linguistic gap, compounded by the need to first master Bengali as a second language, places indigenous learners at a significant disadvantage. The

influence of traditional linguistic patterns, such as native accents and syntax, often leads to difficulties in pronunciation and comprehension of English. Furthermore, the cognitive overload caused by sequential learning—first Bengali, then English—exacerbates the complexity of mastering a third language.

Educational Barriers

The role of the education system in facilitating English acquisition remains inadequate. Teachers in indigenous areas often lack training in multilingual teaching methods, and learning materials remain monolingual, failing to bridge the gap between native languages, Bengali, and English. Additionally, classroom dynamics frequently marginalize indigenous students, with negative peer interactions and stigmatization discouraging active participation. These issues are further compounded by infrastructural deficiencies, such as poor internet connectivity and limited access to modern technology, which restrict the use of digital learning tools that could enhance English proficiency.

Socio-Cultural Influences

Cultural identity plays a critical role in shaping attitudes toward English learning. Indigenous learners often perceive English as a threat to their cultural and linguistic heritage, resulting in resistance to fully embracing it. The stigmatization of indigenous students, whether due to their accents, slower progress, or cultural differences, creates psychological barriers, lowering self-esteem and motivation. Gender disparities and family responsibilities further limit opportunities for certain groups within these communities, especially young girls. Seasonal cultural practices and migrations also disrupt continuity in education, leaving learners struggling to keep up with curricula.

Systemic and Policy Gaps

At a systemic level, government policies and educational programs fail to adequately address the unique needs of indigenous learners. Centralized curricula overlook the cultural and linguistic diversity of these communities, while inconsistent funding and resource allocation leave schools under-equipped to support English learning. The absence of accommodations in language testing and rigid teaching methodologies—such as overemphasis on grammar—further alienate indigenous students, who need more practical and interactive approaches to language learning.

Economic and Environmental Factors

Economic barriers and geographical isolation significantly limit indigenous learners' access to quality education. Many families prioritize economic survival over schooling, leaving students without the necessary resources for learning English. Environmental disruptions, such as natural disasters, further destabilize learning environments, particularly in remote indigenous regions.

Psychological and Motivational Challenges

The psychological toll of these barriers cannot be overlooked. Indigenous learners often experience a loss of motivation due to slow progress and fear of making mistakes. The absence of role models or mentors from within their communities who have successfully learned English exacerbates feelings of hopelessness and disengagement. Moreover, leadership deficits and a lack of awareness about the value of time contribute to low levels of commitment to language learning.

Broader Implications

The challenges faced by indigenous learners highlight deeper systemic inequities in Bangladesh's education system. Without targeted interventions, these learners will remain marginalized, limiting their access to higher education, employment opportunities, and full participation in the broader socio-economic fabric of the nation. At the same time, the push to adopt English must be balanced with efforts to preserve indigenous languages and cultural identities, ensuring that language learning does not come at the cost of cultural erasure.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Curriculum Development and Teaching Methods

Culturally Inclusive Curriculum: Develop bilingual or trilingual learning materials that integrate indigenous languages, Bengali, and English to create a smoother transition between languages.

Interactive Teaching Approaches: Shift from rote memorization to interactive and communicative teaching methods, focusing on practical language usage over grammar-heavy instruction.

Incorporation of Indigenous Contexts: Design English learning content that reflects indigenous cultures and traditions to enhance relevance and engagement.

2. Teacher Training and Support

Multilingual Training Programs: Provide teachers with training in multilingual education methods and cultural sensitivity to better address the needs of indigenous learners.

Incentivizing Teaching in Indigenous Areas: Offer financial and professional incentives to attract skilled teachers to remote indigenous regions.

Regular Feedback Mechanisms: Implement systems for teachers to regularly assess and adapt their teaching strategies based on student needs and progress.

3. Infrastructure and Technological Access

Improved Connectivity: Expand internet and mobile network coverage in remote areas to provide indigenous learners with access to online language resources and virtual classes.

Technology Integration: Equip schools with computers, tablets, and language-learning software tailored to indigenous learners.

Resource Development: Create offline resources such as audio-visual aids and localized language apps for areas with limited connectivity.

4. Policy and Institutional Support

Government Investment: Increase funding for indigenous education programs, ensuring adequate resources, teacher training, and infrastructure development.

Policy Frameworks: Formulate policies that recognize the unique linguistic and cultural challenges of indigenous learners, with clear implementation strategies.

Educational Autonomy: Empower indigenous communities to contribute to the design and management of local education systems, ensuring cultural and linguistic relevance.

5. Community and Family Engagement

Parental Awareness Programs: Conduct workshops to educate parents about the importance of English learning and how they can support their children despite language barriers.

Community-Led Learning Initiatives: Encourage indigenous communities to establish local learning hubs or peer-led study groups for English practice.

Role Model Programs: Highlight successful individuals from indigenous backgrounds who have mastered English to inspire and motivate learners.

6. Addressing Socio-Cultural and Psychological Barriers

Combating Stigmatization: Promote awareness campaigns to reduce discrimination and foster respect for indigenous cultures within schools and broader society.

Mental Health Support: Provide counseling services and build a supportive environment to address the psychological challenges faced by indigenous learners.

Encouraging Risk-Taking: Create safe spaces in classrooms where learners can practice English without fear of judgment or ridicule.

7. Gender and Economic Equity

Support for Girls: Design programs that address gender-specific barriers, such as scholarships and flexible schooling schedules for girls.

Economic Assistance: Provide financial aid, free learning materials, and subsidized transportation to ensure economic hardships do not hinder education.

8. Monitoring and Evaluation

Progress Tracking Systems: Establish mechanisms to regularly monitor the progress of indigenous learners in English proficiency, allowing for timely interventions.

Research and Feedback: Conduct periodic research to assess the effectiveness of implemented policies and programs, adapting them to evolving needs.

9. Leveraging Extracurricular Activities

Language Clubs: Create school-based English language clubs where students can practice through games, storytelling, and debates.

Cultural Exchange Programs: Facilitate opportunities for indigenous students to interact with native English speakers or more proficient peers to build confidence and fluency.

10. Addressing Geographical and Environmental Barriers

Mobile Learning Units: Deploy mobile classrooms or learning units to reach geographically isolated learners.

Disaster-Resilient Infrastructure: Build schools and facilities that can withstand environmental disruptions, ensuring continuity in education during natural disasters.

11. Flexible Language Learning Models

Blended Learning Approaches: Combine traditional classroom methods with online and self-paced learning to accommodate diverse learning styles and schedules.

Adaptive Learning Tools: Use AI-driven platforms that adjust to individual learner needs, focusing on specific challenges in pronunciation, grammar, or vocabulary.

12. Improved Language Exposure

Language Immersion Programs: Organize immersion programs where indigenous learners interact exclusively in English for specific periods, such as workshops or camps.

Media Access: Provide access to English-language movies, songs, and TV shows with subtitles to enhance listening and comprehension skills in a relaxed setting.

Peer Exchange Programs: Facilitate exchanges between indigenous and non-indigenous students to promote language practice through collaborative activities.

13. Enhanced Learning Resources

Localized Learning Materials: Develop storybooks, workbooks, and other materials that blend English learning with indigenous cultural themes.

Audiovisual Content: Create podcasts, videos, and other multimedia content in English tailored to the learning levels of indigenous students.

14. Strengthening Community Involvement

Language Advocacy Groups: Establish local language support groups where community members can share best practices and learning strategies.

Elders' Involvement: Involve community elders in creating culturally sensitive English learning programs to ensure alignment with local traditions.

15. Holistic Language Support

Language Support Centers: Set up dedicated centers for English learning in indigenous areas, offering after-school programs, tutoring, and language labs.

Support for Multilingualism: Encourage the simultaneous development of English and Bengali to prevent cognitive overload and foster parallel language growth.

16. Extracurricular and Creative Learning

Creative Arts Integration: Use theater, music, and art as tools to teach English, making learning more engaging and interactive.

Sports and Games: Incorporate English into sports and recreational activities, such as providing bilingual instructions or holding English-only game days.

17. Encouraging Local Innovators

Teacher-Initiated Programs: Incentivize local teachers to develop innovative teaching methods or materials specific to indigenous learners' needs.

Indigenous Language Entrepreneurs: Support initiatives by indigenous entrepreneurs to create apps, games, or tools for learning English.

18. Inclusive Language Policies

Bilingual Schooling: Advocate for a bilingual or trilingual education policy that equally values indigenous languages alongside Bengali and English.

Multilingual Testing Standards: Design language assessments that accommodate multilingual learners, allowing them to demonstrate competency without being penalized for language transitions.

19. Psychological and Social Support Systems

Confidence-Building Activities: Incorporate group activities, such as debates or role-playing, to build confidence in using English.

Peer Mentorship Programs: Pair less proficient learners with more skilled peers for guidance and encouragement.

Resilience Training: Offer workshops on coping strategies for overcoming fear of failure and maintaining motivation in language learning.

20. Long-Term Sustainable Initiatives

Scholarships and Incentives: Provide scholarships for indigenous students who excel in English to encourage continued learning and higher education.

Career-Oriented Programs: Develop English training programs linked to job opportunities, emphasizing the practical benefits of learning English.

Sustainable Partnerships: Collaborate with NGOs, universities, and international organizations to provide ongoing support for English education initiatives.

21. Mitigating Seasonal Disruptions

Mobile and Satellite Schools: Implement mobile or satellite schooling solutions to address seasonal migrations and ensure continuity in learning.

Home-Based Learning Kits: Distribute portable learning kits with books, exercises, and recorded lessons to ensure education continues during disruptions.

22. Addressing Leadership Gaps

Develop Local Leaders: Train and empower indigenous leaders to advocate for improved education policies and resource allocation.

Motivational Workshops: Conduct motivational workshops for students to inspire them to view English as a tool for personal and professional growth.

23. Gender-Focused Initiatives

Girls-Only Programs: Launch gender-sensitive programs that address the unique challenges faced by girls in learning English.

Community Awareness on Gender Equity: Educate communities about the importance of equal opportunities for girls in education.

24. Creating a National Task Force

Indigenous Education Task Force: Form a dedicated task force to monitor and address the educational needs of indigenous learners, with a specific focus on English proficiency.

25. Leveraging Global Expertise

International Partnerships: Collaborate with global institutions experienced in multilingual education to adopt best practices and innovative methodologies.

Volunteer Programs: Attract English-speaking volunteers to indigenous areas to offer immersive learning opportunities.

CONCLUSION

This research underscores the multifaceted challenges faced by indigenous communities in Bangladesh in acquiring English as a third language, following Bengali as their second language. The linguistic, educational, and socio-cultural barriers, compounded by geographical isolation, limited resources, and systemic inequities, create a complex environment for language learning. The findings highlight significant obstacles such as inadequate infrastructure, poorly trained educators, and cultural and psychological resistance, which hinder the progress of indigenous learners.

However, the study also emphasizes that these challenges are not insurmountable. With targeted interventions, inclusive policies, and collaborative efforts between the government, educators, and local communities, indigenous learners can overcome these barriers and achieve proficiency in English. Recommendations such as curriculum reform, teacher training, community engagement, technological integration, and improved infrastructure can collectively foster a supportive and empowering educational environment.

Ultimately, equipping indigenous learners with English language skills is not just about enhancing their academic and professional opportunities. It is also a step toward reducing marginalization, promoting equity, and preserving their cultural identity while integrating them into the broader socio-economic fabric of Bangladesh. By prioritizing multilingual education that respects and builds upon indigenous languages, Bangladesh can create a more inclusive and linguistically diverse society, ensuring that no community is left behind in its pursuit of progress and development.

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