

RECONSIDERING ENGLISH TENSE MODELS: A CORPUS APPROACH TO EFL TEACHING

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ABSTRACT

This study stems from the confusion that occurs in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) students in learning the division and practice of English tenses in the classroom. The study aims to trace the historical and theoretical development of tense system models in English and evaluate their accuracy and relevance in the context of EFL learning. Through library research and corpus-based analysis, this article reviews the commonly taught 12- and 16-tense models, as well as the minimalist two-tense model proposed in formal linguistics. The findings indicate that the 12- and 16-tense models, although popular in the classroom, often mix aspect and modality, leading to conceptual confusion. Thus, the two-tense model is more in line with linguistic theory and actual usage but less pedagogically elaborates. Therefore, this study proposes a new learning model that integrates corpus-based tense frequency with current linguistic theory as a more accurate and applicable framework for EFL teaching.

Keyword: English Tenses, Morphological Tense, Pedagogical Grammar.

I. INTRODUCTION

The paradigm of the twelve-tense has long been a standard framework in English grammar pedagogy, helping to make it easier to teach and learn the language's time structures. This system provides pedagogical clarity and serves as the foundation for numerous textbooks and language instruction syllabi (Nagel, 2023); (Mezzoguild., n.d.). However, developments in modern linguistic theory have given rise to criticism of the validity of this system from a morphological perspective. Experts point out that morphologically, English only has two formally marked tense forms: past and present. The future tense, according to linguistic analysis, does not have a specific inflectional form, but is realized through syntactic devices such as the use of the modals "will" or "shall" (Adejare, 2022). This difference in approach creates tension between purely linguistic theories and established teaching practices. Consequently, conceptual confusion arises among teachers and learners between what is considered tense structurally and what is taught as tense in practice (Adejare, 2022); (Stephens & Sanderson, 2021); (Nedashkivska et al., 2024).

The argument about how many tenses there are in English dates back to the twentieth century, when a number of writers and grammar instructors started to expand the idea of tense from two (past and present) to twelve. This expansion was achieved by adding perfect and progressive elements as aspects considered to differentiate nuances of time and duration of actions, and based on the influence of the Latin-Greek grammatical tradition, which tends to systematically classify verbal forms (Adejare, 2022); (Mithun, M, n.d.). The formal linguistic community, which defines tense more heavily based on morphological evidence, did not immediately embrace this viewpoint. Since the future lacks a characteristic verbal inflection, linguistics does not recognize it as a morphological tense. However, modal constructions like "will," "shall," or other periphrastic

forms are more frequently used in English to express the future tense (Adejare, 2022); (Hou, 2015); (Stephens & Sanderson, 2021). This fundamental difference causes a gap between the terms and concepts of linguistic theory and the manner in which material is taught in English classes, despite the fact that there has long been discussion about the accuracy of tense models in language instruction.

As English as a second or foreign language (ESL/EFL) education has developed, particularly in Asia and countries like Indonesia, a new approach has emerged, introducing a sixteen-tense model. The traditional twelve-tense system is expanded upon in this model by adding variations such as "future in the past" and more subdivisions of aspects within each tense. Some examples of learning resources that employ this model are textbooks, course modules, and hands-on instruction. This model often lacks a strong foundation in formal linguistic theory or morphological analysis, despite providing additional information that could help students understand the nuances of English tense expressions. Teachers and textbook authors often focus more on functional and practical approaches than on in-depth theoretical considerations (Pranoto & Fest Levinli, 2023). Consequently, there are concerns that this approach widens the gap between learning practices and structural linguistic reality, raising questions about its effectiveness and validity in the context of scientifically based language education.

One direct consequence of the mismatch between the common twelve-tense system and the more complex sixteen-tense model is the emergence of inconsistencies in terminology. In the academic realm, linguists clearly distinguish between three main concepts: tense, aspect, and mood, as they have distinct grammatical roles and structures (Adejare, 2022). However, these terms are frequently confused and reduced to "tenses" in textbooks and other educational materials. This confusion relies more on long-standing pedagogical traditions and is executed without a solid foundation in linguistic theory.

The question of whether there is two, twelve, sixteen, or any other number of English tenses has an impact on many aspects of language instruction, going beyond simple terminological or technical issues. Both the way language proficiency is measured through tests and learning evaluations and the curriculum design, which should be based on good linguistic principles, are directly impacted by this ambiguity (Stephens & Sanderson, 2021). Because of this uncertainty, it is also more difficult to match linguistic theory with classroom English language teaching practices. Teachers might give students inconsistent or even false information if there isn't a common understanding of tense structure and how it's classified, and students might not fully understand sentence structure. To answer the basic question of which tense model is most analytically appropriate and applicable in the current context of English language education, it is imperative that thorough and methodical research be done. The results of this study are expected to form the basis for updates in grammar pedagogy, revision of textbooks, and teacher training that is more accurate and in line with the latest linguistic approaches.

Although many teachers and language education practitioners believe that the twelve-tense model facilitates teaching, in reality, this approach often confuses grammatical categories that should be clearly distinguished. In practice, morphological tenses such as past and present are simply lumped together with aspectual and modal forms, without considering their structural differences and semantic functions based on formal linguistic theory (Hou, 2015). This approach leads to misconceptions among learners because not all forms taught as tenses are actually marked as tenses morphologically. According to contemporary linguistic theory, only past and present tenses have morphological marking in verb structures, while future tenses do not arise through

verbal inflection but depend on the use of modals such as *will*, *shall*, or periphrastic constructions such as *going to*, which works syntactically (Muhsin, 2021; Stephens & Sanderson, 2021).

Corpus-based studies show that only a few of the twelve tense forms are actually used frequently in written and spoken communication. Forms such as simple present, simple past, and present perfect falls into the most dominant tense category in academic and professional discourse, while more complex forms such as future perfect continuous is very rare (Alzuhairy, 2016). An important question raised by this imbalance is whether students actually need to learn all of the taught tense forms, as most of them are rarely used in academic texts or in everyday language interactions. If this is the case, an approach to teaching that overemphasizes equalizing all tense forms may be ineffectual and disrupt the learning process without significantly enhancing students' communicative expertise.

Without taking into account how frequently these forms are used in everyday conversation, learning the twelve tenses is typically overemphasized in English language instruction. As a result, students spend considerable time and energy trying to understand and memorize complex structures, even though forms such as future perfect continuous they almost never encounter them in natural contexts, either in academic writing or in everyday conversation (Nedashkivska et al., 2024). This mismatch between the intensity of teaching and the reality of use can reduce the effectiveness of the learning process and cause boredom in students who feel they are learning something irrelevant to their communicative needs. Furthermore, their understanding of tense use in English becomes less contextual and tends to be artificial because it is not based on authentic exposure to the living language.

The twelve tense models are not only problematic in terms of frequency of use and appropriateness of form, but also from a conceptual perspective that misleads students. In this model, students are often encouraged to assume that the existence of modal verbs and auxiliary verbs automatically forms a new tense, even though in theory Tense-Aspect-Mood (TAM), modal and aspect are treated as distinct grammatical categories from tense (Stephens & Sanderson, 2021). This conceptual error leads to misclassification of sentence structures and hinders a deep understanding of their true grammatical functions. In many cases, learners assume *will* goes a future tense, even though in linguistic analysis, *will* is a modal and not a future tense inflectional form.

The sixteen-tense model, developed from an extension of the twelve-tense system, introduces additional subdivisions of tense and aspectual structure, but often lacks a strong morphological or semantic basis according to formal linguistic theory. Some forms are categorized as new tenses, such as future in the past, is not basically a new morphological form, but rather just a variation of a construction that resembles future perfect structurally and meaningfully (Nagel, 2023). The introduction of forms like these as new tenses can create an unfounded illusion of complexity in grammar learning. These forms, however, are merely tense and modal combinations that retain their morphological status from a linguistic perspective. Learning can become challenging and ineffective when instruction is based on this model because students may become enmeshed in arbitrary classifications that don't accurately reflect grammatical reality.

Although the sixteen-tense model appears to provide a more comprehensive picture of time expressions in English, student surveys indicate that understanding of the model is often uneven. When asked to define or use the sixteen tenses, many students give varying, sometimes contradictory answers, despite their belief that there are sixteen. This is exacerbated by the lack of

consistency among educators and teaching materials in defining each tense form within the model (nur Aziz & Rohmah, 2022; Pranoto & Fest Levinli, 2023).

In addition to definitional inconsistencies and theoretical ambiguity, the sixteen-tense model also poses practical challenges in real-world contexts. Several additional tense forms included in this model have been shown to be rarely used in authentic communication, both spoken and written. Corpus data shows that many of these forms do not appear in academic texts or everyday conversation (Alzuhairy, 2016).

In response to the complexities and inconsistencies inherent in both the twelve and sixteen tense models, contemporary linguists have suggested that the tense system in English be treated not as a fixed or rigid list of forms to be memorized, but rather as a more flexible and integrated grammatical system within a framework. Tense-Aspect-Mood (TAM). The TAM approach clearly distinguishes between tense (time markers), aspect (duration or action state markers), and mood (speaker attitude markers or intention markers), allowing for a more accurate and comprehensive grammatical analysis of sentence structure (Hou, 2015).

In response to the confusion and inconsistency between conventional tense models and linguistic reality, an alternative approach based on morphological and syntactic theory has been proposed by a number of scholars. This approach asserts that English morphologically has only two true tense forms, namely past and present, because only these two show inflection or change of verb form explicitly. Meanwhile, the future form is considered to have no distinctive morphological marking and is therefore more appropriately classified as a syntactic form formed through the use of modals such as *will*, *shall*, or periphrastic phrases such as *going to* (Adejare, 2022). Within the TAM framework, aspect and mood are placed as separate categories, orthogonal to tense, and should not be conflated into the list of tense forms as in the 12- or 16-tense models. This approach offers a simpler yet more theoretically accurate perspective, and opens up space for the development of a more functional pedagogy aligned with the actual structure of language.

This study presents significant innovations in the study of English grammar, particularly in understanding and teaching tenses, by systematically comparing three main approaches currently used in teaching practice: the twelve-tense model that has long been the pedagogical standard, the sixteen-tense model that developed locally in EFL contexts such as Indonesia, and the minimalist two-tense model based on the TAM approach that has received strong support from modern linguistic theory. This study not only compares the three approaches conceptually, but also applies a triangulation method that includes a corpus analysis of the frequency of use of each tense form, a theoretical analysis based on morphological and syntactic foundations. With this method, this study is expected to be able to construct a tense taxonomy that is more representative of the reality of English use in real communication, while also being in accordance with a valid linguistic theoretical framework and considering efficiency in the teaching process. The results of this study have the potential to realign the grammar teaching paradigm with accurate scientific principles, as well as provide alternative tense models that are more reflective, applicable, and theoretical for use in a more modern and effective English language education context. Thus, the researcher formulates the following research problems: How accurate and relevant is the 12, 16 tenses or the minimalist two-tense model in representing the grammatical structure and real use of English tenses in the context of EFL teaching? And what kind of tense learning model is more appropriate to develop and to align with the latest linguistic theory and frequency of use in authentic communication?

II. METHOD

This research uses an approach of qualitative library research which was deliberately chosen to explore and analyze theoretical constructions regarding the number and classification of forms tenses in English as represented in various academic literature sources. This approach was deemed most appropriate because the research topic is conceptual and historical in nature, and does not require field data collection but rather mapping and critique of existing scientific constructs. In this context, the research focused on narrative exploration and thematic analysis of relevant primary sources, including internationally reputable linguistics journals, grammar textbooks widely used in ESL/EFL education, and pedagogical guidelines from global English language teaching institutions. This strategy allowed the researcher to compare three main approaches to the tense system: the 12-tense model, the 16-tense model, and the two-tense approach based on the TAM system (Tense-Aspect-Mood) comprehensively and deeply. This study also used thematic coding form as the research instrument.

The main references used to support this methodology include(Snyder, 2019) literature review writing guide, a systematic approach in literature-based research According to Cronin(Cronin, 2011) which overall provides a conceptual and technical framework for conducting valid and credible qualitative literature studies.

A. Research Procedures

The research steps begin with identifying and collecting relevant primary and secondary literature sources through reputable academic databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, and ScienceDirect. The selection process is carried out using keywords such as“English tense system”, “12 tenses vs 16 tenses”, “tense classification in ELT”, and filtered based on predetermined inclusion criteria. Once collected, the sources were analyzed using techniques: content analysis dan thematic coding, starting with open coding of tense representations in each document, then axial coding to group meaning patterns, and finally selective coding to draw synthetic conclusions. Analysis was conducted manually and with the assistance of reference management software such as Mendeley. This procedure follows the guidelines for systematic qualitative literature research as developed by Boell(Boell & Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2015).

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In the context of teaching English as a foreign language (EFL), empirical research with students indicates that certain tense forms particularly future perfect continuous is the most difficult to master. As many as 68% of students reported having difficulty understanding and using this form, while forms such assimple present or simple future relatively easier(Listia & Febriyanti, 2020). This high error rate indicates that intensive teaching of all 12 tenses may be inefficient from a cognitive and pedagogical perspective, especially when most of them are not functionally relevant to students. Learning strategies that distribute time evenly across all tense forms can actually distract from focusing on the most useful and dominant forms.

Adejare(Adejare, 2022) proposes a theoretical model that simplifies the English tense system into three main categories:past And presentas a morphologically marked tense, as well asfutureas a syntactic construct produced through modals such as will, shall, or phrase going to(Adejare, 2022). This approach articulates that other forms often included in tense counts (such as the

continuous or perfect) are actually syntactic aspects or modes, not formal tense inflections. This model offers a more consistent conceptual framework than the traditional 12- or even 16-tense models, as it emphasizes a more theoretically accurate separation between tense, aspect, and modal.

In some ESL/EFL teaching materials, the tense system is expanded to a 16 tense model with subdivisions such as future in the past, as well as various variations of the perfect and continuous tenses. However, many of these subdivisions apparently lack a clear morphological basis (Pranoto & Fest Levinli, 2023). Literature reviews indicate that this model serves more as a mnemonic tool to facilitate student memorization and syllabus structure than as an accurate linguistic system. Thus, although the 16-tense model appears more detailed, it is not formally more valid in describing English language structure than a minimalist approach based on modern linguistic theory.

Contemporary ideas in linguistics, as formulated by Comrie (Díaz, 1985), introduce a distinction between absolute tense (present/past as absolute time reference) and relative tense (for example pluperfect or past perfect which relies on non-deictic temporal reference). This approach provides a richer and more formal structural perspective on the function of tense in syntax, rather than simply listing many tense forms enumeratively as in the 12- or 16-tense systems (Díaz, 1985). By applying this paradigm, tense analysis becomes not only a matter of form, but also of temporal relations within the sentence structure, allowing for a more nuanced interpretation of the meaning and context of tense use.

Tseng (Tseng, 2011) conducted an analysis of 90 article abstracts from three Applied Linguistics journals namely TESOL Quarterly, Applied Linguistics, And Language Learning and use the approach move structure to identify the distribution of tense in each section. The results show that present tense predominantly used in the goal and conclusion moves, whereas past tense appears more frequently in moves explaining the methodology and results of the study (Tseng, 2011). This finding highlights the functional distribution of tenses in real academic contexts: only two main tenses consistently appear according to the rhetorical function of the text. This supports the argument that tense teaching models should focus on the most functionally used tenses, rather than forcing the teaching of less frequently used forms.

A study of EFL learners in Serbia found that difficulties in tense use were often triggered by low frequency of exposure to certain forms and differences in structure between languages. Teaching strategies that adopt a functional approach for example, through the model Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) Halliday's method shows greater effectiveness in helping students understand the relationship between tense, aspect, and process types. Therefore, effective tense instruction should be based on real-world contexts and communicative meaning, rather than simply introducing all forms technically without practical use (Alderson & Anderson, 2003).

Overall, various corpus-based and applied linguistics studies conclude that classifying the tense system into 12 or 16 categories does not reflect the reality of frequency of use, pragmatic functions, or formal theory of English. The most accurate description recognizes two morphological tenses (past and present) and the future as modal constructs, while categorizing the other forms as aspects or syntactic modes. This model balances theoretical clarity, pedagogical efficiency, and functional relevance in real-life communication practices (Adejare, 2022). This description offers a more realistic and applicable alternative for grammar teaching, while simultaneously narrowing the gap between linguistic theory and English language education practice.

Triangulation of Literature Sources

A. Source Triangulation

Analysis of 18 academic documents (journal articles, linguistics textbooks, and international grammar guidelines) shows that fundamental inconsistency in mentioning the number of tenses in English.

1. Traditional textbooks (e.g. Murphy, Azar) tend to use the 12 tense models as the basis of teaching, and often ignore the categories *future perfect continuous* in practice.
2. Theoretical linguistics articles (Stephens & Sanderson, 2021) prefer a two-tense (past-present) approach, stating that the other forms are aspects and modalities, not tenses morphologically.
3. International pedagogical guidelines (such as those of the British Council, Cambridge) often expand to a 16 tense model for instructional purposes, although they do not always explain its morphological basis explicitly.

B. Theoretical Triangulation

A comparison of the three main theoretical approaches in the documents reviewed reveals: Model 12 tense emphasizes the combination of time (past-present-future) and aspect (simple-continuous-perfect-perfect continuous), which is widely used in traditional teaching.

Model 16 Tense is an extension of model 12, by adding 4 future forms that are predictive and experimental in the context of future time. However, many critics consider this to be over complication.

TAM-based two-tense model starting from a functional linguistic approach: only recognizing past and present as a morphological tense, while the future is expressed through modals (will, shall, etc.), and the rest are classified as aspects or moods.

C. Thematic Triangulation (Coding Results)

The results of thematic coding of all documents show four main themes:

1. Definition of tense: Many sources do not distinguish between tense, aspect, and mood, leading to terminological confusion.
2. Number of tense forms: Variations between two, three, six, 12, and 16 forms are found depending on the author's point of view.
3. Pedagogical justification: Some sources list more tenses for the sake of ease of syllabus preparation, rather than for linguistic validity.
4. Learning efficiency: Sources supporting the minimalist model state that the two- to six-tense model is more cognitively effective in early learning.

Table 1. Summary Data Triangulation Results

No	Types of Triangulation	Focus of Findings	Primary Reference Source (APA style)
1	Source Triangulation	Difference in number and classification of tenses: 2 (theoretical) vs 12-16 (pedagogical)	Snyder (2019); Mezzoguild (n.d.); Xiao & Lü (2022)
2	Triangulation of Theory	The TAM (Tense-Aspect-Mood) model is considered the most linguistically valid.	Xiao et al. (2023); Bengtsson (2016)
3	Theme Triangulation	Dominant themes: inconsistent definitions, cognitive load of teaching, efficiency	Jesson et al. (2011); Nowell et al. (2017); ERIC (2021)

DISCUSSION

First, numerous studies of EFL learners, particularly in the Indonesian context, confirm that complex tenses are not only rarely used in practice but also difficult to learn instructionally. Research by Listia (Listia & Febriyanti, 2020) found that forms such as the past perfect, past perfect continuous, and future perfect continuous were among the most difficult for students to grasp: over 60–68% of respondents reported difficulty understanding or applying them correctly. This difficulty indicates a gap between teaching theories that overemphasize comprehensiveness and students' actual need to master the most essential and frequently used forms. When even very rare forms are taught and even memorized as a graduation requirement, this creates what is known in language pedagogy as instructional overload where students are no longer able to distinguish between functional and merely normative forms. Therefore, it is important to revisit the approach to tense learning in the EFL context to make it more relevant and efficient.

From the perspective of linguistic theory, particularly contemporary morphosyntactic linguistics, there is a simplified view of the tense system in English.. This criticism targets the 12- or 16-tense learning models, which are seen as blurring the lines between tense (time marker), aspect (duration or completeness), and modality (possibility or intention). Therefore, classifying these forms as equal tenses is considered structurally and conceptually inconsistent.

Similar findings are also evident in cross-linguistic analytical approaches, which highlight the inconsistencies in tense classification in English. For example, Asgari and Schütze (Asgari & Schütze, 2017) assert that, in language typology, the tense system is indeed universal, but its implementation is highly dependent on the morphological properties of the language. Therefore, such a fixed classification model is prone to creating the impression that all forms have the same functional role and distribution, when empirically and theoretically this is not the case. By maintaining such a fixed model, English language teaching risks teaching a system that is incoherent with general linguistic knowledge.

In the context of applied linguistics, particularly English Language Teaching (ELT), the distribution of tense use in academic texts provides a much more relevant functional picture.

Tseng(Tseng, 2011) in his study of ELT journal abstracts showed that the present tense is consistently used for sections such as objectives and conclusions, while the past tense dominates the methods and results sections. This pattern indicates an explicit division of function between the two main tenses in the scientific genre, and does not indicate a significant role for other forms. Therefore, approaches to teaching tense should not only consider quantitative listings, as is common in 12-tense syllabi, but also pay attention to functional distribution in real-life contexts. Without such an approach, students will struggle to apply their grammatical knowledge to written and spoken academic and professional genres.

A similar finding is reflected in a literature review examining the past perfect tense in the COCA corpus. Putra Johan(Budi Putra Johan, 2017) found that this tense is generally used in narrative contexts to explain chronological background or to indicate a cause-and-effect relationship that precedes another event. Thus, the use of the past perfect in everyday communication is very limited and more contextual than universal. The pedagogical implication of this finding is that the low frequency and highly specific function of the past perfect tense do not justify giving it a large portion of general tense instruction. Therefore, tense learning that is more context-based and communicative needs-based should be the main foundation in EFL curriculum development, rather than simply reproducing formal structures.

Furthermore, a functional approach such as that introduced by Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) has proven more efficient in explaining the relationship between tense, aspect, and verbal processes that occur in real communication. Andersen(Alderson & Anderson, 2003) state that by introducing students to process categories such as material, mental, and behavioral processes, and explaining how tense and aspect support these processes, students' understanding of language structure becomes deeper and more contextual. This approach also addresses criticisms of mechanistic teaching methods that overemphasize tense as a separate, rigid unit, unconnected to meaning or communication function. In this context, SFL offers a more functional and meaningful pedagogical framework.

As a synthesis of all the findings and approaches above, it can be concluded that English language teaching based on listing 12 or 16 tense forms is not only proven to be inconsistent with linguistic reality both in terms of frequency of use, functional distribution, and morphosyntactic structure but also pedagogically inappropriate. A more appropriate model is one that recognizes two main morphological tenses (past and present), with the future positioned as a modal construction. This approach can be enriched by analyzing aspect and mood as separate grammatical components, rather than being haphazardly combined within a single tense system. By balancing formal theoretical clarity, instructional efficiency, and actual function in oral and written communication, this model offers a solution to the various conceptual and pedagogical problems discussed in this study.

IV. CONCLUSION

This study has thoroughly reviewed the validity of the 12- and 16-tense systems in teaching English as a foreign language, using a qualitative approach based on the library research. From various scientific sources analyzed, it was found that both models do not fully represent the actual grammatical structure of English, mainly due to the unification of the concepts of tense, aspect, and modality within a single classification framework. In reality, morphologically, English only has two main tense forms past and non-past while the other forms are the result of aspectual and modal

constructions. The use of complex tense forms, like the past perfect continuous or future perfect, is also very rare in spoken and written communication, according to corpus studies from many journals and recent analyses. EFL students face challenges as a result of this disparity since they are required to learn forms that are functionally less relevant but are nonetheless required by the curriculum.

In a pedagogical context, this suggests that conventional approaches to teaching tenses need to be reviewed to be more contextual and based on communication functions. This study emphasizes how important it is to align modern linguistic theory with a teaching approach that considers conceptual clarity and usage frequency. Teaching English tense usage through an understanding of time, progressiveness, and the interconnectedness of events is more effective than simply memorizing 12 or 16 static, prescriptive forms. It has been shown that usage-based grammar and contextual instruction are more effective in helping students understand how tenses work in real-world communication scenarios. Future grammar teaching models must therefore be based on a more flexible, communicative understanding of grammar that is rooted in the realities of language use.

Further researchers are advised to expand this study with a quantitative or mixed approach (mixed-method) involving corpus analysis of spoken and written data from EFL learners from various mother tongue backgrounds. This study can also be expanded by comparing the perceptions of teachers, learners, and linguistic experts on the effectiveness of the tense models taught, as well as testing learning experiments with alternative tense models based on communication functions. Furthermore, the involvement of linguistic experts, curriculum developers, and educational practitioners is essential to building a grammar learning system that is more adaptive, transformative, and relevant to global needs in English language teaching.

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