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COVID 19: MEASURES TAKEN BY MALAYSIAN TERTIARY ENGLISH EDUCATORS IN OVERCOMING CHALLENGES DURING EMERGENCY REMOTE TEACHING AND LEARNING (ERTL)

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Abstract

The strike of the COVID-19 pandemic has forced the closures of most higher learning institutions around the world. Subsequently, the process of teaching and learning was being carried out online almost fully and this situation had yielded many challenges to tertiary English educators including those in Malaysia. Among the challenges faced were related to their technological skills, students' participation, facilities, internet connection, and conducting assessments online. Subsequently, various measures were also taken by them to overcome the challenges in ensuring the continuity of the process of teaching and learning during this unprecedented situation. Thus, a multiple case study was conducted to explore the measures taken by nine English educators from three public universities in Malaysia, in overcoming the challenges they encountered during online learning throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. The data was collected through focused group interview sessions and individual open-ended responses for triangulation purposes. Based on the thematic analysis conducted, the findings disclosed that to overcome the challenges, educators had to improve their technological skills, find ways to increase students' participation and conduct better online assessments. This study is believed could anticipate significant insights and guidance in planning and executing a meaningful ESL online teaching and learning experience for relevant parties, including the English educators, higher learning institutions, and the Ministry of Education especially during ERTL.

Keywords: Online learning, Emergency Remote Teaching (ERTL), Higher learning institutions, Overcoming challenges, English as a Second Language (ESL), COVID-19

Introduction

The unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic has affected the educational sector to a great extent. In order to lessen the spread of the COVID-19 virus, most educational institutions, including higher learning institutions, were closed and the process of teaching and learning was carried out online. Although online learning is quite common among the educators in higher learning institutions nowadays, this sudden shift had brought several challenges to these educators including the English educators. Among the challenges faced were educators' lack of technological skills (Efriana 2021; Chung et al., 2020; Rulandari, 2020), students' participation during synchronous sessions (Lukas & Yunus, 2021), internet connection (Razkane et al., 2022; Mumtaz et al., 2021; Kamal et al., 2020) and conducting online assessments (Hijazi & AINatour, 2021; Samat et al., 2020) Thus, different measures had to be taken in ensuring that students were not left behind during the pandemic. Some of the strategies to overcome the challenges were by escalating teachers' ICT knowledge and skills (Bao 2020; Chung et al., 2020), understanding students'

current learning situation and conducting different types of learning assessments and evaluations (Nasri et al., 2020). These new teaching approaches are carried out with one ultimate aim; they could provide more meaningful online learning experiences for their students. However, studies involving English educators, in exploring the measures taken by them in overcoming the challenges faced in public universities in Malaysia are found to be limited. Thus, this study intended to explore the measures taken by nine English educators from three public universities in Malaysia, in overcoming the challenges they encountered during online learning.

Literature Review

2.1 Bandura's Self-Efficacy

According to Bandura (1977), self-efficacy is defined as one's judgement on his or her ability to organize and perform necessary actions to achieve the required performance. Thus, educator self-efficacy refers to how well an educator can affect and influence students' success (Corry & Stella, 2018). Ones' beliefs in their self-efficacy are developed by four sources, namely mastery experience, vicarious experience, verbal persuasion and emotional or physiological arousal (Bandura, 1998). Self-efficacy can be shaped effectively through mastery experience. English educators who successfully completed a task either executing well-planned online learning or using suitable digital tools or platforms in conducting online learning will robust self-efficacy. Additionally, self-efficacy can also be influenced by vicarious experience as they observe their colleagues' successes and failures. English educators whose colleagues have successfully carried out synchronous sessions and online assessments may feel that they can accomplish the same. Moreover, persuading someone that they have the skills and abilities to execute a task successfully can also increase their level of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977). English educators who constantly receive positive feedback from their colleagues and students during online learning will have higher motivation to achieve more. This is in line with Azman et al. (2020), claiming that one's level of self-efficacy is increased when highly influential people give compliments on the successful execution of a task. In addition, emotional or psychological arousal, which refers to the ability of a person to manage and overcome emotional pressure, is also a source of one's self-efficacy. For instance, English educators who have difficulties incorporating technologies in their teaching before might feel stressed and anxious to do everything online and as a result, lower their self-efficacy (Azman et al., 2020). According to Haleman & Yamat, (2020), educators with a high level of self-efficacy work with extraordinary effort and consistently find ways to overcome challenges. This shows that self-efficacy is important for English educators to keep them motivated to teach especially during ERTL. Thus, to obtain the objective of the study, the Self-Efficacy theory by Bandura (1977) serves as the guide to build and support the findings in this particular study.

2.2 Improving Educators' Ict Knowledge And Skills

In order to accomplish effective online learning during the ERTL, educators must have basic skills in operating technology-based devices and applications (Chung et al., 2020; Bao 2020; Bhattarai 2020; Nasri et al., 2020). Thus, considering the challenges faced by the educators due to the lack of ICT knowledge and skills, support is needed in order for the educators to conduct better teaching during online learning. Educators with no or minimal experience in conducting online learning need to attend courses or workshops organised by the faculties or the universities to increase their ICT knowledge and skills. In Giridharan's (2020) article, he mentioned that the Curtin University campus in Malaysia had constantly been giving their educators technology-based knowledge and support. Similarly, Nasri et al. (2020) pointed out, the Faculty of Education at National University of Malaya has developed a strategic academic plan so that their educators would have sufficient time to prepare online teaching materials and at the same time familiarize themselves with virtual learning platforms. The educators were also given training, and a help desk consisting of ICT lecturers was set up.

2.3 Understanding Students' Learning Situation

In order to understand the situation of her students, an educator asked her students regarding their current learning situation (Gao & Zhang 2020). As a result, the online learning platforms were determined, and the assessments

were then designed based on the responses gathered from the students. Haider and Al-salman (2020), in their study, then stated that consistent and appropriate communications between students and educators in regards to guidance, course requirements, assessment methods, tools, modes of delivery and directions are crucial elements in cultivating students' learning satisfaction. Berry (2019) also added that it is important to be aware of students' backgrounds and issues they are facing for example in terms of interactions, internet connection and facilities to promote social presence and establish a sense of belonging. This will eventually help educators to facilitate online discussions effectively (Reinholz et al., 2020). It was also reported that most students had problems with an internet connection (Almazova et al. 2020; Chung et al., 2020; Kamal et al., 2020; Mumtaz et al., 2021; Rinekso & Muslim 2020). Thus, another measure that educators have taken to overcome this problem is by preparing pre-recorded lectures and making them available online. The online sessions are also recorded so that students who were absent due to the instability or unavailability of internet connection would not be left out. Another way of accommodating the needs of students with inadequate internet coverage and no proper devices is to conduct their lessons via WhatsApp and Telegram (Nasri et al., 2020). Since almost every student owns a mobile phone nowadays (Nasri et al., 2020), learning or communication carried out through this asynchronous platform can be very helpful. In addition, according to Jiang (2021) educators who were holding up frequent chatting sessions in order to create a positive online learning environment, will elevate students' comfort level and promote an even better language learner-friendly space as they are actually developing a positive social presence.

2.4 Conducting Better Online Assessments

In overcoming the problems to conduct online assessments, Day et al. (2020) in their study stated that many group project assignments were replaced with individual tasks as they found that completing group projects is difficult in this current situation. Students' work is also graded based on effort, not just quality. Studies also showed that educators varied the types of assessments given such as games. Hashim et al. (2019) found that on improving ESL learners' grammar with gamified learning. The results showed an improvement on the grammar post-test after using three interventions of gamified learning; Socrative, PowerPoint Challenge Game and Kahoot!. Additionally, according to Van Gaalen et al. (2020) other than increasing students' attention and giving them a sense of achievement, elements in online games like awarding badges, the leader board, up-leveling and incentives expand students' engagement during online learning.

Methodology

3.1 Research Design

A qualitative method was employed in which a multiple case study approach was used. It involved three Malaysian public universities where three English educators were interviewed in three different focus-group interview sessions. They were also asked to respond to open-ended questions through Google Form.

3.2 Research Participants

Purposive sampling was used where one male and eight female English educators who are currently teaching English courses for diploma and degree students. The participants were chosen as they fulfilled the characteristics that the researcher had decided which were a) English educators who serve at a Malaysian public university and were conducting online learning during the time, b) the students are ESL learners, and c) willing to be interviewed. Pseudonyms, P1-P9 were also used for confidentiality.

3.3 Research Instruments

Microsoft Teams was used as the platform to conduct all three focus-group interview sessions. In each session, ten general questions were asked related to the study's aim in order to guide the researcher in conducting the interviews. The participants also answered open-ended questions which were administered through Google Form.

3.4 Data Collection Procedure

A few steps were adhered to by the researcher in collecting the data. First, the semi-structured interview questions were designed. Next, the researcher sent letters to all three participating public universities to get the gatekeeper's permission to conduct the study. Then, all participants were added to a Whatsapp group to disseminate any information faster. All participants also received a consent letter to ask for their permission to be interviewed. All three semi-structured interview sessions took about 90 to 120 minutes and the participants were then asked to answer open-ended questions which were administered through Google Form, two weeks after the interview sessions.

3.5 Data Analysis Procedure

All three interview sessions were transcribed verbatim and a copy of the transcription was sent to the participants to be reviewed and verified. Then, the data collected from the focus group interview sessions (FGI) and the open-ended responses (OER) were analysed using NVIVO 12 software. NVIVO 12 was used to find the codes and categories before thematic analysis could be conducted to identify the common themes among the findings. This is a multiple case study, thus ample extensive data was needed to make certain that significant consequences and conditions are considered. Thus, multiple data sources are essential for triangulation and minimising bias (Yin, 2017).

Results and Discussions

4.1 Improving Technological Skills

In overcoming the challenges they faced in terms of their technological skills, the participants had taken some measures which were, seeking help from colleagues who are better in technology, watching videos on YouTube and TikTok, attending webinars, online courses and training.

4.1.1 Seeking help from colleagues who are better in technology

One of the ways the participants improved their technological skills was by seeking help from other colleagues who are better in technology. Three of the participants in the study seek help and learn from the same individual whom they considered tech-savvy. They learned how to handle assignments, post notes, tick students' attendance and log in. They also discussed with their friends on their ways of using technology. They stated that they will remember what they have learned and practice them.

*"We tend to **have talking circles where those who are good at it like Bella, okay..(laugh) will teach us, in a very small group. Okay one by one how to handle assignments, how to post notes, how to tick students' attendance**" (P3, FGI)*

*"I would also **umm discuss with my friends like Puan Hazwati and also Puan Fatimah. In terms of you know their own ways of using certain technology.**" (P7, FGI)*

*"What I have did I **have to learn from one of my friend in Kuala Pilah. I think I just video called her... Nurul Nabilah which is my best friend. So, I really learn a lot from her because she's really a tech savvy person. For this kind of technology, I would always have to find someone to teach me.**" (P5, FGI)*

The findings indicate that the participants needed help from their colleagues whom they considered technology experts, and one participant was helping her friends with technology. This is related to one of the sources of teachers' self-efficacy, vicarious experience. When the participants in this study observed their colleagues' successes, they became role models to imitate and refer to (Bandura, 1998). As the participants believe that their colleagues are experts, their opinions and ways of using technology are reliable and prominent.

4.1.2 Watching videos on YouTube and Tiktok

The participants also watched many videos on YouTube and TikTok to learn more about the new technology in teaching, designing games, and how teachers in other countries deliver their lessons using technology. P1 stated

that TikTok is very resourceful and helpful. By watching videos on TikTok, P1 can learn new hacks of teaching and learning for students and teachers. From the videos, the participant also learned how students plagiarised their assignments based on the students' acts.

*"By **watching many Youtube videos.**" (P2, FGI)*

*"I would look on YouTube especially on how you know **teachers in other countries deliver their lessons using technologies and I learn a lot from them.**" (P7, FGI)*

*"But I also uhh.. I think **TikTok nowadays is very very resourceful.** Yes. Because when you have Tik Tok, you can see the students act. You know? Those act that students can do is very useful. Because **I will know the students what they do in terms of assignments. If they plagiarize things and then you know they just copied things.**" (P1, FGI)*

*"**Watching Tiktok videos for new hacks of learning and teaching for students and teachers.**" (P1, OER)*

The findings show that the participants in this study realised that in order for them to accomplish effective online learning during the ERTL, they must have basic skills in operating technology-based devices and applications (Chung et al., 2020; Bao 2020; Bhattarai 2020; Mohamad Nasri et al., 2020). This explains the efforts made by the participants by going online and watching the videos on YouTube and TikTok to improve their technological skills.

4.1.3 Attending webinars, online courses and workshops

The participants also attended webinars, online courses and workshops which were mostly provided and managed by the university. They stated that it was because they wanted to improve their capabilities to handle online learning and also their technological related skills.

*"...usually **lecturers from our university would share their skills.** For those who have skills and knowledge in terms of online games, and then they will share it and make it as a webinar for us. I will usually attend those kind of webinar to **improve my capabilities to handle online learning.**" (P3, FGI)*

*"Yes, I also **attend to webinar that are being offered to us in our university.**" (P1, FGI)*

*"Firstly, **we do have seminars** when we were in the PKPB umm you know PKPB timeline here. Few months ago, we had some **seminars on how to use Microsoft Teams,** ... Umm these seminars were **managed by the faculty.** So, the faculty provided some seminars for us to join in order **to improve our technological related skills.**" (P7, FGI))*

*"**Training and learn through online tutorials.**" (P4, OER)*

*"**By joining more courses and training online provided by the university.**" (P9, OER)*

The findings are consonant with Nasri et al. (2020) whom they pointed out that educators were also given training, and an ICT help desk assist to assist them in conducting online learning during ERTL. In addition, the findings also show that the participants have a high level of self-efficacy as they took many measures in overcoming the challenges they faced in terms of technological skills. According to Halemam & Yamat, (2020), teachers with a high level of self-efficacy work with extraordinary effort and find ways to overcome challenges.

4.2 Increasing Students' Participation During Synchronous Sessions

In increasing students' participation during the synchronous sessions, the participants called out their students' names, asked questions and engaged students with current topics.

4.2.1 Calling out students' names

The participants stated that to get students to give feedback and to answer questions during the online sessions, they picked, pointed and called out their students' names, especially the shy ones. They also asked the students to call out or pick their friends' names randomly to answer questions or give opinions. It worked well for the participants and also the students. It was also a surprise to one of them as she stated that her class was much alive. P2 stated that she believes that teachers play a big role in pushing the students to interact and initiated a conversation.

*"**Call out names to answer questions.**" (P6, OER)*

*"But usually **for the shy person...** That's what I can do, the least that I can do. So, when I pick their names, they know that I would pick their names because sometimes I would say that by picking names is I would take their attendance."* (P5, FGI)

*"I usually **call their names and ask their friends to also call their favourite friends to answer questions or to give opinions. It works well with me and the students** so far."* (P9, OER)

*"So, my approach would be usually **my class were surprisingly this semester, it's very much alive because I would normally ask them ahh to just pick their friend's names randomly to answer the question of the day..**"* (P9, FGI)

4.2.2 Asking Students' Questions

The participants also asked students questions to increase their participation during the synchronous sessions. They started the class with greetings and would take a few minutes to ask questions. The questions were also related to students' personal experiences so they would learn from their previous experiences or mistakes. In order to connect with their students before the session started, the participants also asked students about their problems and questions like "How was your day?", "Are you having any problems?" "Is their internet connection fine?" and "Are they having difficulties with other subjects?" P2 stated that the questions were asked to make the students more comfortable during class.

*"Every time I **start the class with greetings and during the session I will take a few minutes by asking questions.**"* (P8, OER)

*"When I ask questions to the students, I will always **ask them to relate to their personal experiences so the students can learn from their previous experiences or mistakes. That will make them remember.**"* (P1, OER)

*"But most of the time... Ok? I will always asked my students **uhh about their problems. What are the problems they are having? Before connecting my class..ok? If I always encouraged them to share their problems with me, and every single time before I started my class, I will ask them...what are they doing? Are they okay? Is their internet connection fine?**"* (P3, FGI)

*"...during class. I will ask them **how is your day? I need to..you know actually invite them and make them feel more comfortable during my class. So, I am asking them how are they doing? Are you having any problems?**"* (P2, FGI)

This is in line with Berry (2019) as he stated that it is vital to learn about students' backgrounds and the issues they are facing in terms of interactions, internet connection and facilities. Getting students to talk during introductions of a lesson can build up students' social presence and sense of belonging in class. This will eventually help educators to facilitate online discussions effectively (Reinholz et al., 2020).

4.2.3 Engaging students with current topics

The participants also find some contemporary issues to talk about that are related to students nowadays in order to make them more involved and participative in class. P3 explained that before attending the class, she would prepare like 5-10 minutes to read a little bit about the current things that she would like to bring upon the class to show interest such as PUBG (PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds) and Korean drama series. P9 then stated that she called it a "starter pack" to the class and once she did that with the class, they were alive and noticed that the students really like to talk during the session when given the opportunity.

"Engage lesson with current topics." (P3, OER)

*"I would definitely go and find um..something that is contemporary issue, you know. Aa, but of course something that is related to students nowadays. Yeah, I mean like issues that happened like the Neelofa issue and all that. So to get them to..to..to **make them more..more involved and participative in my class.**"* (P2, FGI)

*"I also do the same... before I attend my class, I would prepare like 5-10 minutes to read a little bit.. I read a little bit, okay, what are the current things that I would like to bring upon the class, so that they aa..can show interest. So for example, I talked about **PUBG game**. And then okay, one fine day I will bring their interests with **Korean series...**" (P3, FGI)*

*"...So, I would always **catch their attention by asking them about "what's new today?"**, So, what have you read online?" so they would you know discuss about that as a... we call it as a **starter pack to the class** okay. So, **once we did that, they're alive, then we start the class...they love to talk during the session when given the opportunity** because I think it's because of the freedom given. So, I let them to talk about what they want to talk about."(P9, FGI)*

According to Jiang (2021) educators who were holding up frequent chatting sessions in order to create a positive online learning environment, will elevate students' comfort level and promote an even better language learner-friendly space as they are actually developing a positive social presence. This explains why the students are alive and show more interest during the online sessions as the participants were creating a positive online learning environment for the students by engaging them with current topics.

4.3 Conducting better online assessments

In conducting better online assessments, some measures have been taken by the participants in terms of the types of assessments given to the students and the platforms used for the assessments.

4.3.1 Types of assessment given

The participants stated that during online learning, they prepared some interesting assessments for the students like quizzes through online interactive games and they made sure that they assigned students different tasks every week. P1 and P2 mentioned that they used an interactive online platform such as Kahoot because they stated that students find it more enjoyable as they can compete with each other and collect points at the same time. These online platforms which include Google Form, provide instant results and feedback and also the fastest submission.

*"Give them **quizzes through online games**." (P5, OER)*

*"Do an **interactive content; games, quizzes or short presentation**." (P2, OER)*

*"**Every week students will be given different tasks** according to the topic they learn for the week so that they will not do the same tasks." (P8, OER)*

*"And so, I would use that kind of platforms such as **Kahoot**, you know? **The interactive online platforms**. And then, umm.. because Kahoot they can **compete with each other**, right? Like they can **collect the points**, and all that. So **they find it more enjoyable**." (P2, FGI)*

*"**Online quizzes - for instant results and feedback**." (P4, OER)*

*"...So the other one hour, I will be doing tutorial with them. So, the tutorial is where we are **trying to assess them through Google Form, quizzes**. That would be the **fastest submission** through the Google Form." (P5, FGI)*

Moreover, the participants also assigned the students other formative and summative assessments like writing tests through Microsoft Teams where students can check for plagiarism and grammar through the platform. P1 stated that he let his student watch a movie or a short story, discuss the issues presented in them and then relate the issues to the course content. P8 on the other hand put considerations for tasks in which students might have problems with facilities so she would change the tasks accordingly.

*"**Writing tests using MS Teams - students can check plagiarism and their grammar mistakes, and learn to correct their grammar**." (P4, OER)*

*"**Formative and summative**. Formative to check on the understanding of the specific topics and summative helps to see how students can apply the knowledge as a whole." (P6, OER)*

*"I really like to ask my students to **watch a movie or read a short story** and then we would have a discussion among us to **discuss the issues presented and relate it to the course content**." (P1, OER)*

“Normally I will put my consideration for tasks which the students might have the facility problem and change the tasks accordingly.” (P8, OER)

The participants in this study determined the platforms for assessment based on their students' current learning situation. This is consistent with the study conducted by Gao and Zhang (2020) where they stated that in order to understand the situation of her students, an educator in their study asked her students about their current learning situation. Subsequently, the online learning platforms were determined, and the assessments were then designed based on the responses gathered from the students. Furthermore, the participants in this study also gave students a lot of quizzes through an interactive online platform like Kahoot and some stated that the students enjoyed it so much. The finding is in line with previous studies conducted as they found out that other than improving ESL students' grammar (Hashim et al., 2019), gamified learning like Kahoot also increases students' attention and gives them a sense of achievement. Additionally, elements in online games like awarding badges, the leader board, up-leveling and incentives can also expand students' engagement during online learning (Van Gaalen et al., 2020).

4.3.2 Platforms for assessment

In overcoming the problems of conducting online assessments due to students' problems in regards to facilities and internet connection, the participants asked for advice from the senior lecturers. The senior lecturers would allow them a little bit of flexibility, by instead of using synchronous platforms, they used Whatsapp video calls, one-to-one only. If the students were still unable to do it, they would allow them to pre-record, but that would be the last resort. Other platforms used by the participants for assessments were also Google Form, Google Documents, Microsoft Teams and YouTube. The platforms were determined based on students' situations as students with poor internet connections for example P4 allowed her students to complete their assessment through the Whatsapp application if they had problems doing it in Microsoft Teams.

“So, aa..I..aa..like us, the three youngest, youngest lecturers in our department, we really sometimes ask for advice from our senior lecturers. And they usually will give, will allow us, a little bit of flexibility, in terms of um..maybe aa..turn to..aa..instead of apps, we use Whatsapp video calls, one to one only. And if they still cannot do it, we will allow them to pre-record. But that is going to be the last resort...”(P3, FGI)

“So, from my point of view, when they told me that they only have their mobile phone to work on, umm I have to take a step umm further to help them you know to learn their lessons okay... I would mention that, I would give them ahh questions and also exercises which I umm prepared using Google Form...It's the only way for them you know to participate. I mean just to learn something...”(P7, FGI)

“..And then they need to submit it using everything that uhh Google documents.” (P3, FGI)

“...Poor internet connection, so I will ask students with poor internet connection to do their assessment through Whatsapp. Those who have sufficient internet connection, they will do it through Micorosft Teams....” (P4, FGI)

“...I asked student to do a recording and then upload the recording on Youtube...” (P4, FGI)

The participants in this study use different kinds of asynchronous platforms for assessments to accommodate their students' learning situations so that the students can complete all the assessments. According to Nasri et al. (2020) another way of accommodating the needs of students with inadequate internet coverage and no proper devices is to conduct their lessons via asynchronous platforms like WhatsApp and Telegram. They also stated that since almost every student owns a mobile phone, learning or communication carried out through these platforms can be very helpful as asynchronous platforms like Whatsapp uses less mobile data than an application like Microsoft Teams.

Conclusion

The present study was designed to explore the measures taken by nine English educators from three public universities in Malaysia, in overcoming the challenges they encountered during ERTL. The findings revealed that

some of the strategies used by the participants in overcoming the challenges faced were improving their technological skills, increasing students' participation during synchronous sessions and conducting better online assessments. The findings also show that although the process of teaching and learning is conducted online due to an unprecedented situation like the COVID-19 strike, the participants in this study are having a high level of self-efficacy as they took different kinds of measures in overcoming the challenges they faced during ERTL. The implication of this study goes beyond the context of this study. Although online learning is common among English educators in tertiary institutions, they still faced numerous challenges during ERTL and had to take different kinds of measures in making sure that the process of teaching and learning continues. This shows a lot more is needed especially in the aspect of technological skills in equipping English educators to carry out their learning instructions online. Thus, other stakeholders including the Ministry of Education, higher learning institutions, and policymakers could prepare a contingency plan that could further assist English educators in overcoming any anticipated challenges they might face during online learning and also ERTL in the future. However, a limitation of this study is that it only involved nine English educators from three public universities in Malaysia. Further studies that involve other English educators from other public universities in Malaysia and in South East Asia could be conducted to explore how other English educators in this region are coping with the challenges they face during ERTL.

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