

# **Assessing the Value and Effectiveness of Study Abroad and Exchange Programs in Foreign Language Degree Programs: A Case Study**

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**Abstract:** As study abroad efforts take on increased importance globally, it is vital that we use the resources of the academy to research the impact and effectiveness of these programmes. This paper assesses aspects of the varied exchange (EXC) programmes and study abroad (SA) programmes which exist at the University of the West Indies, St. Augustine campus (Trinidad y Tobago). Data was collected from among students in the French and Spanish degree programmes. The study sought to assess the academic benefit of the programmes while at the same time assess the value-added aspects of the programmes. Overall, it was found that the impact of these international experiences on student learning has not to date been assessed with an aim to making interventions in the varied programmes. As some previous research indicates, to simply send students to a location abroad for academic study is not sufficient toward facilitating the larger goal of creating effective global citizenship. Findings from this research lend empirical support to the notion that study abroad and exchange programmes at all levels facilitate the creation of global citizens.

**Key-words:** Study Abroad, Exchange Programmes, Student Learning, Foreign Language Learning, Global Citizens.

## **1. Introduction**

### **1.1. Context**

While study abroad programs are increasing globally, at the St. Augustine campus of the University of the West Indies (UWI) [The Univer-

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sity of the West Indies (The UWI) comprises campuses at St. Augustine in Trinidad and Tobago, Cave Hill in Barbados and Mona in Jamaica as well as the Open Campus (a virtual campus)], participation in study abroad (SA) and exchange (EXC) programs do not seem to have great enough reach among student stakeholders. It is clear that this is not because of a lack of programs nor information. As the websites for the Department of Modern Languages and Linguistics (DMLL) and the International Office (IO) of the UWI both indicate, there are a large number and variety of programs open to student participation yearly at both the undergraduate and postgraduate levels and across a wide range of institutions. Additionally the DMLL hosts one meeting yearly in which students are given information on possible SA and EXC opportunities which exist and they are afforded the opportunity to liaise with past SA and EXC candidates. In addition, EXC interviews are advertised widely across the campus. Thus, knowing the clear benefits of SA and EXC programs, it remains unclear why students of the UWI in L2 degree programs seem reticent to take on the challenge of living, working or studying abroad.

This study examines only the undergraduate programming in French and Spanish and covers the years 2003-2013. It was felt that a 10 year span would ensure information on a broad base of students, present trends (whether upward or downward) in accessing programs and also it would highlight the diversity of programs offered. The major in French or Spanish in the DMLL is a 3 year (full-time) or 5 year (part-time) program. Students in French or Spanish have the option to access SA or EXC programs during their second year of study or the first semester of their final year. In addition, to participate in SA and EXC programs, students of the UWI, St. Augustine are required to have a minimum GPA of 3.00 (a B average). During the period of time under study, French students in the DMLL had access to the following programs:

- *Summer Immersion: Contact et Recherche Caraïbe (CO.RE.CA.)* A two week program in Guadeloupe.
- *Study Abroad Program - Université des Antilles et de la Guyane (UAG):* A semester long program in Martinique. (This is now Université des Antilles).
- *Study Abroad Program - Université Michel de Montaigne (Bordeaux III), France:* A year long program in France.
- *English Assistantship Program:* An exchange/work abroad program of one academic year for recent UWI graduates.

Students also had access to any of the programs which come out of UWI partnerships (through The International Office) with other institutions for a semester-long or a year-long SA program at any of the following Francophone institutions:

- 1) Université de Montréal – Canada
- 2) Institut d'Etudes Politiques of Bordeaux – France
- 3) Institut d'Etudes Politiques of Toulouse – France
- 4) Sports Management School – France

Similarly, Spanish students had access to a number of programs as follows:

- *Student Assistantship*: An exchange program of one academic year with the Universidad Pedagógica Nacional (UPN), Bogotá. Students must have completed two academic years at the UWI, St. Augustine and must return to the UWI, St. Augustine to complete their degree program.
- *Study Abroad Program*: Opportunities exist for semester-long or year-long programs in Colombia, Costa Rica or Spain.
- *Short stay (pasantía corta)*: A six week summer program with Universidad Nacional de Colombia, Bogotá. (Note: This program was suspended in 2009 due to economic costs.)
- *Short stay (pasantía corta)*: A four week summer program with the Universidad Nacional de Costa Rica.
- *ICETEX Language Assistantship Program in Colombia* [ICETEX Programa de Asistente de Idiomas en Colombia]: An exchange/work abroad program of one academic year for recent UWI graduates (The MOU is between the UWI and the Instituto Colombiano de Crédito Educativo y Estudios Técnicos en el Exterior/ICETEX).

In addition, students who were majors of Spanish could access any of the programs which come out of UWI partnerships (through The International Office) for a semester-long or a year-long SA program at any of the following Spanish-speaking institutions:

- 1) Simon Bolivar University – Venezuela
- 2) Universidad de Oriente – Venezuela
- 3) Universidad de la Sabana – Colombia
- 4) University of Zaragoza- Spain

It is also to be noted that students could choose to access SA opportunities from universities in the Anglophone world. These partnerships with the UWI are numerous and include (but are not limited to) Queens University, Canada, The University of Miami, Florida, USA.

## 1.2. Problem Investigated

The purpose of this study is to identify the SA and EXC programs offered at the UWI, St. Augustine.<sup>1</sup> It explores the possible reasons or causes of a seemingly lackluster participation by students and focuses on the central

research question - whether students fail to take advantage of SA and EXC opportunities due solely to personal economic limitations. The study also seeks to assess the overall impact of the international experiences of the students and to determine the academic benefit of the programs while at the same time describe the value-added aspects (if any) to the degree programs.

### 1.3. Research Objectives

Undoubtedly, the levels of student participation in SA and EXC programs are of value both to the DMLL as well as to the institution as a whole as these programs offer ultimately, the production of a more globalized graduate. This level of diversity stands as one of the Core Values of the UWI. However, it is more important to the department that we have a sense, based on empirical evidence, of the levels of student learning throughout SA and EXC programs as well as on students' return to the institution (in the case of students who return to complete degree programs). This not only allows us a basis by which to measure the internationalization of our programming but also to have evidence of learning among our French and Spanish language students and perhaps most importantly, be able to gauge the value of SA and EXC programs to the overall UWI French and Spanish degrees. Broadly, the goal of the study was to present a comprehensive overview and an assessment of the SA and EXC programs offered to date in the DMLL.

More specifically, the study collected data on programs and student participation in the various programs (Period: 2003-2013). It sought to ascertain the international experience that students gain and it compared the way/s in which students benefit from participation in programs. The paper ends by determining if participation adds value to the DMLL French / Spanish degree programs and makes some future recommendations.

## 2. Literature Review

Although SA programs see students receiving credit for the work and study carried out abroad, EXC programs provide students with work abroad experience for which they do not receive university credits. However, despite these differing program models, student participation in both programs take place in the DMLL French and Spanish degree programs. To date, there are numerous studies on SA and EXC programs across the U.S. and throughout Europe where programs such as the Erasmus program (European Community Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students) have existed since the 1980s (this program is now called Erasmus Plus / Erasmus+). Programs such as these which are oriented toward globalizing education see the exchange of thousands of students annually.

However, in the context of the Anglophone Caribbean [here I refer to those Anglophone countries in the Caribbean which are not US or UK overseas territories], there has not been a study of this nature. Moreover, to date, no research of any type has been carried out on SA and EXC programs at the UWI, St. Augustine although SA and EXC programs have been in operation across the UWI since the 1990s. A central issue which must be taken into account is that across the Caribbean there are a variety of university systems. For example, students in a U.S. university system (located in the Caribbean) are nevertheless able to access SA programs globally. Also, at the UWI, there are a number of students in self-funded programs, for example, students at the Arthur Lok Jack Graduate School of Business, who have access to and are encouraged to take part in short programs such as the International Business Study Trip; a two week exploration which sets out tours of the country to be visited, cultural experiences, business meetings, tours of business facilities, business courses, workshops or strategic sessions and of course social interaction with locals. Trips of this nature can amount to prices in the range of TT\$25,000.00 to \$30,000.00 but students are encouraged to plan for the trip and to set up payment schedules. However it must be noted that such programs are not included in this research study.

The Department of Modern Languages and Linguistics is deeply committed to the notion that SA and EXC programs are important to the academic and cultural development of our undergraduate student majors of French and Spanish and perhaps even ideally should be a required part of the degree program. At present all SA and EXC programs are optional. Among the numerous studies by U.S scholars, Vande Berg (2007) indicates that to simply send students to a location abroad for academic study is not sufficient toward facilitating the larger goal of creating effective global citizenship (395). More recent studies such as Stebleton, Soria and Cherney (2013), point out that through SA programs, students acquire greater understandings of complex global issues through interactions and work with peoples of other cultures. Still, there is strong support to show that SA and EXC programs not only facilitate student intellectual growth but also contribute to the internationalization of the DMLL. Undoubtedly one form of student assessment which contributes to our understanding of what students have learnt/gained from their study abroad experience is the blog. Increasingly students have taken to blogs and other social media to examine or analyze their lived experiences during or as a result of SA programs. For us at the UWI, St. Augustine, blogs such as *Garvin's World: A Blog by Garvin Tafari Parsons* (<http://garvinsworld.blogspot.com/>) or the blog *Hunter TT* by another former student Theron Thompson (<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCidL3auAUa8WNV819XIIldQ>) go a long way in helping us to monitor intercultural connections and to determine the impact of SA and EXC programs on our student participants.

### 3. Data Collection

In terms of the collection of data, the first stage of the process focused on collecting the names of as many students as possible who participated in Foreign Language SA and EXC programs during or after their studies at The UWI, between 2003 and 2013. E-mails were sent to Heads of Departments, Study Abroad Coordinators, Program Coordinators and Lecturers. Also, names were extracted from memoranda, and other files in the DMLL Main office. By the end of this stage, 218 names were acquired. The breakdown of this figure is as follows:

- 127 persons participated in Study Abroad/ Exchange programs under the French degree program; 111 were female and 16 were male.
- 91 persons participated in Study Abroad/Exchange programs under the Spanish degree program; 76 were female and 15 were male.

A second stage of the process then began which involved obtaining the contact information of the 218 persons, as most of the names did not have this information attached or readily available. Using the names as a guide, the Research Assistant searched Facebook, perused the lists of incoming PG students as well as the lists of graduating students with degrees in Spanish, French and/or Latin American Studies, and sought information from lecturers or others. Contact information (E-mail and Facebook) was obtained for 149 persons, of which:

- 92 persons participated in Study Abroad/ Foreign Exchange programs under the French degree program; 78 were female and 14 were male.
- 57 persons participated in Study Abroad/Foreign Exchange programs under the Spanish degree program; 48 were female and 9 were male.

In the third stage, messages were sent to the 149 persons. 117 messages were delivered via Facebook, while 32 emails were sent. Persons were asked to:

- Verify or provide their current email address
- Name the Study Abroad/ Foreign Exchange Program/s in which they had participated
- Indicate the academic year of participation
- State their major
- Give their year of graduation

The final stage was placing all persons who responded to the messages and emails on the database of survey candidates. Two databases were created- one for each degree program- and names were sub-divided according to gender. Each database was further sub-divided according to the specific Study Abroad/ Foreign Exchange program, with the participants being listed

chronologically. Of the 149 persons who received messages, 104 responded. These responses are the ones used in the completion of this report. They were as follow:

- 56 persons participated in Study Abroad/ Foreign Exchange programs under the French degree program; 46 were female and 10 were male.
- 48 persons participated in Study Abroad/ Foreign Exchange programs under the Spanish degree program; 38 were female and 10 were male.

A further breakdown of figures according to the specific Study Abroad/Exchange Program is as follows:

*French Study Abroad/ Exchange Programs:*

- Study Abroad, Bordeaux 3: 13 persons; 10 females, 3 males
- English Language Assistantship Program: 38 persons; 33 females, 5 males
- Immersion Program, Guadeloupe: 18 persons; 14 females, 4 males
- Study Abroad, Université de Montréal /Year-long: 1 male
- Study Abroad, Université des Antilles et de la Guyane (UAG) / Year-long: 1 male
- Visiting Lecturer Assistant, Bordeaux 3: 1 female
- Teacher Training Program, Guadeloupe: 1 female

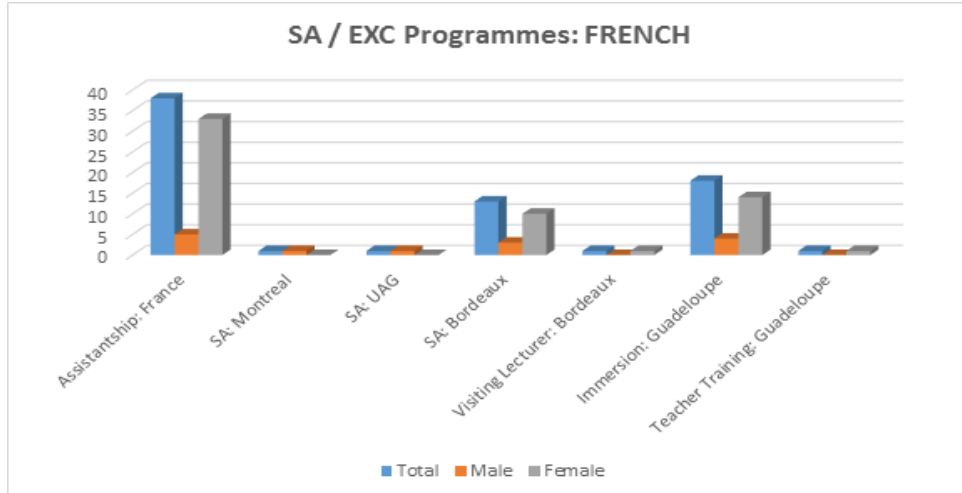


Figure 1. Study Abroad and Exchange Programs in French

*Spanish Study Abroad/ Foreign Exchange Programs:*

- Immersion Program, Universidad Nacional, Bogotá: 21 persons; 17 females, 4 males

- Immersion Program, Universidad Javeriana, Cali: 8 persons; 6 females, 2 males
- Exchange Program, UPN/UWI: 14 persons; 11 females, 3 males
- ICETEX Work Abroad Program: 13 persons; 9 females, 4 males
- Study Abroad, University of Zaragoza, Spain: 1 female
- Independent Study/ Work Abroad Ventures: 4 females

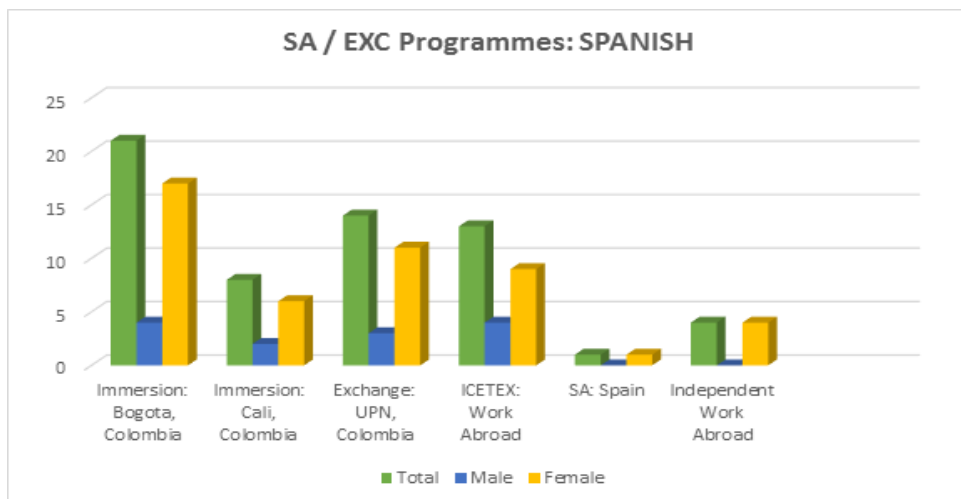


Figure 2. *Study Abroad and Exchange Programs in Spanish*

Among the total of 104 candidates, 98 surveys which employed thirteen questions, were administered electronically since 6 of the 104 survey candidates had participated in more than one program. Candidates were not given a required response time, however, periodic reminders were sent out and after a four month period, 65 survey responses were collected which were complete and the data was then collated and analyzed. The return of surveys was voluntary however, the written comments returned contained both positive as well as negative comments by students who were both pleased as well as displeased with aspects of the programs. From this we can conclude that the sample was fairly unbiased.

Of the five open-ended questions in the survey instrument, candidates were asked to describe their study abroad experience, to indicate whether they felt the program was of benefit to them and why, to discuss the benefits or disadvantages of the orientation session prior to departure, to assess their return to the UWI, to indicate if there was a follow up “work abroad” experience after graduation and/or indicate if their present job (if employed) makes use of the language studied. Finally, a control group of five students (n = 5) who chose to not participate in any SA or EXC program was chosen and interviewed. The focus group of 5 students who did not participate in any programs (3 female 2 male) met in a one and a half hour session and



responded to 5 open ended questions regarding their choice to not participate in any SA or EXC program. Their responses were similar to each other in that all 5 cited financial reasons as the main drawback to their lack of participation in any program. Overall, these students:

- had found SA attractive in the orientation session
- felt that they needed to complete their degree in as short a time as possible (3 years) and get a job so as to start earning money
- felt they did not have money to spend on such programs.
- indicated that they were unable to save monies despite the fact of knowing about the SA/EXC programs from the start of the degree program
- suggested a study abroad information session with more information given to students and more advice provided on how to save for participation in SA/EXC programs
- felt that they would seek to apply (n = 2 / both female) for the Language Assistantship program offered to graduating students after graduation because:
  - a. they had heard very good things about it from returnees
  - b. it is a paid position
  - c. it is in a foreign location and that would look good on their CVs

#### **4. Discussion and Analysis**

The results offer varying degrees of support for both SA and EXC programs in French and Spanish however; there is clearly an expectation of SA and EXC programs among the French majors. It appears that there is more of a culture of study abroad among French students. Although more anecdotal than empirical evidence exists; of the focus group n = 5 indicated that French students seem to have more of an expectation of SA and/or participation in SA and EXC programs because they noted that from early in their degree, other students would openly discuss plans for and/or experiences abroad. They all agreed that this was not the case among Spanish majors. Overall 82% of the respondents of the survey were women; a factor which is not surprising as the vast majority of majors in both French and Spanish degree programs at the UWI, St Augustine campus are female.

In the survey, respondents (n = 20) indicated that benefits included speaking in the classroom with more confidence on return to the UWI as well as greater success in the Listening Comprehension module of language courses. Overall increased competency in the language was clearly a factor which drew many students (n = 46 respondents felt this to be the most positive and distinctive benefit to the SA or EXC experience). As this student points out:

The program was a definite benefit. It allowed me to gain invaluable experience in teaching English as a foreign language, as well as increasing my fluency in Spanish. It gave me an advantage in my final year of undergraduate study as well (*Student A*).

Many students linked their improved academic performance to greater intercultural awareness and their own personal growth or confidence arising from the SA or EXC experience (n = 49). As another student points out, the program helped with both intellectual growth as well as cultural awareness:

This [program] was definitely a benefit - It helped me to improve my Spanish language fluency and develop practical use of the language. Also the experience of living in a new country contributed to my personal growth - enhanced my ability to deal with new and challenging situations, made me more open to different cultures (*Student X*).

Overall, most students felt that there were more benefits to the programs than bad experiences. In the main, students' negative comments centered on EXC programs not having an academic slant. Students (n = 10) felt that this could be improved by awarding full credits or even co-curricular credits for work carried out in such programs. Students (n = 7) also indicated that although they were provided with an excellent orientation session prior to departure, what is needed are tailored courses on teaching English and/or cultural awareness especially for the EXC students who go abroad to teach English. Additionally, some students (n = 3) mentioned encountering what they thought to be situations of racial prejudice in France and 1 student reported an incident of racial prejudice in Spain which she saw as a genuine human interaction. Perhaps more importantly, the student felt that it helped her to reflect on intercultural mind-sets. She said:

I learnt to deal with racism as well; many people considered me *latina* (I guess because of my accent and my hair and possibly the way I dress), and there are many Spanish people that have a slight hatred for Latin people. I literally heard an old man talking to his friend one day about how Latin people are annoying and they ruined the Spanish language. Basically saying that they were the creators of their own (for lack of a better adjective) "uneducated" form of the Spanish language. I was also called a *negra* once but not in the acceptable way the Dominicans would say it. It was said in such a very condescending manner. I actually cried. But! I got tough and it all helped me to realize how blessed we are here in Trinidad (*Student Y*).

Finally, the overall majority of students (n = 63) indicated a self-perceived improvement as a direct result of SA and EXC programs. Perhaps most importantly, students felt that the SA and EXC programs provided them with an opportunity for academic, personal, and intercultural development. This also included the students (n = 2) who had reported very negative incidents during the time of their SA program. As one French student pointed out:

The Exchange program was a huge benefit - The program teaches individuals the value of learning a foreign language through sharing one's own language/culture with a foreign audience. Furthermore, there is no better way to learn/improve one's competence in foreign languages than to actually live in a foreign country and experience the culture and people associated with them (*Student L*).

Here, Parsons' commentary not only speaks to the notion of intercultural sensitivity but it is also a strong affirmation of his personal development over the period of the stay. No doubt the experience of the riot may have been troubling, but his clear empathy with the frustration of the students in Colombia given their lack of resources as well as his adaptability is emphasized. Further, although he adapted to the new cultural environment, his seemingly flippant comment on 'missing the UWI' also displays a maturity of thought in recognizing that at the home institution, there was much in the way of resources for which he had to be grateful but only recognized after departure.

There were areas that this study did not explore due to limited funding and resources. For example, there are clearly more French than Spanish participants in SA and EXC programs in the DMLL. This situation should be further investigated as the Spanish section intake is about 100% higher than that of French and approximately 50% of French students are also Spanish students (Double majors). However to complete this, students would have to be surveyed to investigate why they were more apt to choose French programs or indeed to explore the other possible influences on their SA and EXC choices. Additionally, the study did not explore a comparison between the overall numbers in the programs in French and Spanish vs the numbers who take part in SA and EXC programs. This information would be important to gain insight into the overall impact of SA and EXC programs on graduating classes as a whole.

Clearly more data is needed to expand the horizons of this research and thus the information collected on student patterns in SA and EXC programs. However, this has funding implications. The latter is urgently needed as the DMLL and the UWI continue to register lower enrolment rates in language programs every year. But there is also a need for greater collaboration

between the International office and the DMLL so as to intensify recruiting efforts. That said, this is not to undervalue the information received in this preliminary study. One definitive area of importance not covered in this study is the value added to internationalization and intercultural sensitivity among students by a large international staff. Over the period under study, the staffing in the department was approximately 55% foreign. This would have provided students with knowledge of cultural, racial and ethnic diversity and a certain level of comfort or ease with working with peoples from other cultures. This is an area therefore that should undoubtedly be analysed in any further research work on SA carried out in the DMLL.

## **5. Conclusions**

Participation in SA and EXC programs is not necessarily growing among students in the DMLL but no factors indicate diminishing participation either. Despite the first orientation meeting which takes place in semester one at which students are advised to consider and plan for participation in SA and/or EXC programs, despite information which is filtered to the student population through social media and through the International office, and despite the fact that Trinidadian and Tobagonian students access GATE funding [GATE is the Government of Trinidad and Tobago funding program which offers financial assistance and assures tertiary level education opportunities to nationals of the country] which covers tuition, many students still claim the lack of funding as the major barrier toward their participation in programs. The results of this study suggest that students perceived an improvement in their cultural competence and knowledge in the foreign language. However the former is a complex construct and a difficult one to prove and the latter may have more to do with the motivation to quickly complete the degree on return home. What is certain is that students who study abroad or who participate in EXC programs have an increased chance of learning based on intercultural experiences, that is to say, students benefit from the mere experience of living and/or working in another culture based squarely on increased awareness.

By analyzing students who have participated in SA and EXC programs at the UWI, St. Augustine campus, over a ten year period, the current study hopes to provide support for the argument that the institution must view positively student participation in these programs and be prepared to explore varied funding measures whether through the regional institution or through the varied governments which support the UWI. The varied MOUs which the UWI hold with international institutions already serve to remove one barrier; that of the easy transfer of credits earned from the institution abroad to the UWI. However, the UWI must also seek to somehow remunerate the students who participate in EXC programs and who do not receive credits for those programs. Nevertheless, it is hoped that this paper presented the problems but

more importantly highlighted the possibilities for student learning abroad and presented the student view that SA and EXC programs are an educational exercise with benefits.

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