Prospective Freshman English Teachers' Knowledge of the English Sound System

Kadir Vefa TEZEL[1]

Abstract

Foreign language teachers use the spoken form of the target language when they teach. One of their professional responsibilities while teaching is to form a good model of pronunciation for their students. In Turkey, English is the primary foreign language taught in all educational institutions. Prospective English teachers in the English Teacher Education departments in Faculties of Education are the products of that system, and they come to their universities having been taught English for years. This study aimed to investigate the knowledge of the English sound system prospective teachers had acquired before they started their university studies. Statistical analyses showed that the students had serious problems with regard to the sound system of English and that a two-semester first year course would, by itself, not be able to compensate for the significant lack of knowledge the students had. Suggestions as to how to tackle with the problem are presented.

Key Words: Pronunciation, suprasegmental phonology, segmental phonology, English, teacher education

Birinci Sınıf İngilizce Öğretmen Adaylarının İngilizce Ses Sistemi Bilgisi

Öz

Yabancı dil öğretmenleri öğretim esnasında hedef dilin sözlü biçimini kullanırlar. Öğretim esnasında öğrencileri için iyi bir telaffuz modeli oluşturmaları görev sorumluluklarından biridir. Türkiye'de tüm eğitim kurumlarında öğretilen birinci yabancı dil İngilizcedir. Eğitim fakültelerinin İngilizce Öğretmenliği bölümlerde okuyan İngilizce öğretmeni adayları bu sistemin ürünüdürler, ve üniversitelerine yıllarca İngilizce öğretildikten sonra gelirler. Bu çalışma, onların üniversite eğitimine başlamadan önce edindikleri İngilizce ses sistemi bilgilerinin düzeyini araştırmayı amaçlamıştır. İstatistiksel analizler öğrencilerin İngilizce ses sistemi ile ilgili eksiklerini olduğunu ortaya çıkarmıştır, ve öğretmen adaylarının ilk yıl iki dönem boyunca aldıkları dersin tek başına bu konudaki ciddi bilgi eksikliklerini gidermesi olası görünmemektedir. Sorun çözümü ile ilgili öneriler sunulmuştur.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Sesletim, parçalarüstü sesbilgisi, parçasal sesbilgisi, İngilizce, öğretmen eğitimi

[1] Yrd. Doç. Dr, Abant İzzet Baysal Üniversitesi Eğitim Fakültesi, Bolu. E-posta: Vefa2000@gmail.com

Introduction

Spoken form of any language is primarily used by its speakers for communication. In the case of foreign language learning, this fact becomes the tacit primary purpose for learning that language. As the conventional environment for learning the foreign language is schools, the target language is taught, using a systematic approach as time is limited in all educational endeavors. The first attempt to systematize language teaching was made by the International Phonetic Association (IPA). One goal of the association was to improve the teaching of modern languages. Richards & Rodgers (2014) underline the fact that the language scholars who founded the IPA in 1886 took on professional interest in spoken language. The association regarded training in the sounds of the target language essential. Stern (1991: 89) presents the translation of the six articles of the Association, the first two of which state that foreign language study should begin with the spoken language of everyday life, and the language teacher's first aim should be to familiarize his students thoroughly with the sounds of the foreign language.

Wilhelm Viëtor, who was one of the founding scholars of the IPA, advocated the training of language teachers in the sounds of the target language so that they could set an example for their learners. Even though the primacy of spoken language in foreign language teaching was delineated 130 years ago, the realization of those ideas did not quite materialize.

Two factors contributed to that outcome in foreign language teaching: *time* and *paradigm*. The first of those is the *time period* in which those ideas were vocalized. At that time and for quite some time after that, it was difficult to access sources that would expose learners to the authentic use of the foreign language: audio and video materials were either not available or scarce, and the only other plausible source - native speaker teachers - who would present a real model of the foreign language the learners were learning were hard to find. In those circumstances, textbooks became the main means of teaching and learning the foreign language. This, in return, limited learners' initial and frequent exposure to the written form of the target language. Learners' exposure to the pronunciation of the target language was mostly limited to their teacher's knowledge of the spoken form of that language. Students, who learned a foreign language in those circumstances, would have a better knowledge of its grammar rules and vocabulary of the foreign language; yet they would consider their ability to

communicate in the target language to be very limited.

Today, with the advancements in technology, distances have decreased and the frequency of contact and face-to-face interaction among the people of the world has increased. In addition to this, computer technology makes it possible for people to communicate with speakers of other languages

even from the comfort of their homes. In other words, people increasingly find themselves in situations where they converse in a foreign language. As long as English remains as the default language of international communication, that foreign language will be English, and communicating in English will be the primary goal for people who teach and learn it. In fact communicating orally with foreign nationals primarily in English has long been a fact of life for Turkish people in the coastal and touristic regions of Turkey and in the business world of the country.

The second reason refers to the two principles that have dominated the teaching of pronunciation: *nativeness* principle and *intelligibility* principle (Levis, 2005). Nativeness principle was followed until the 1960s, and it lost popularity as it was untenable and ignored the listener. Intelligilibity principle, on the other hand, "recognizes that communication can be remarkably successful when foreign accents are noticeable or even strong" (Levis, 2005, p. 370). Intelligibility recognizes the role of listener in addition to speaker and recommends that pronunciation instruction emphasize features that contribute to understanding, rather than less useful features that exist. Unfortunately, because of the emphasis on written language, pronunciation teaching in Turkey has failed to make progress in any of those paradigms.

Despite the changes in the world and in the world of English teaching, the teaching of English in Turkey has not been successful in making the intended transition to teach students English for communication in state schools. Regardless of the fact that curriculum changes have been made to update the English curriculum and the in-service training seminars conducted by the Ministry of Education in order to equip English teachers with recent developments and practical techniques in the field which the researcher was a part of, the teaching of English is still largely in written form, rule-based, and standard-exam geared. The current situation is contrary to the global and local reality, and it cannot be sustained. Freshman students who decide to become English teachers are the products of these circumstances. These students often complain that their previous exposure to spoken English was severely limited, and they consider themselves incompetent in terms of their ability to speak and comprehend English. In order to determine the extent of this repeatedly expressed discontent by prospective teachers, a diagnostic test (Gilbert, 2012) was given to the newcomer teacher candidates to measure their knowledge of the segmental and suprasegmental features of English to be able to identify and quantify the dimensions of the problem they have been complaining about.

With this goal in mind, this study is significant for two reasons. To the author's knowledge, it is the first to assess the extent of prospective freshman English language teachers' knowledge of English segmentals and suprasegmentals after they graduate from state high schools, following years of English instruction. In this sense, it gives the interested parties an idea as to how well state high school graduates

possess the knowledge of English phonology. The second reason for the significance of this study lies in the fact that, unlike the undergraduate students in the English Language Teacher Education (ELTE) departments of other universities discussed in the related literature section that follows, the participants in this study had not attended a one-year intensive preparatory school English program before they became students in the ELT department. In other words, this study is the first to capture, analyze, and share prospective English teachers' knowledge of English pronunciation which they had learned in the state school system before they became freshman students in the ELTE department.

Professional Literature on Teaching Pronunciation

The relevant literature on the topic will be presented under three major headings: First, inherent differences that exist in English and Turkish and the problems they may cause when the written form of English is taught in classrooms will be discussed. This will be followed by the studies that investigate prospective English teachers' knowledge of the segmental and suprasegmental aspects of English pronunciation. The final section will share the results of a study on teacher education in Turkey to convey the substantial problems that stem from the current teacher population in state schools.

The differences between Turkish and English may cause problems for Turkish EFL learners: English is defined as a stress-timed language whereas Turkish is a syllable-timed language. Richards & Schmidt (2010) define stress-timed language as "a language (such as English) with a rhythm in which stressed syllables tend to recur at regular intervals of time and the length of an utterance depends on the number of stresses rather than the number of syllables"(p. 562). They define a syllable-timed language as "a language with a rhythm in which syllables tend to occur at regular intervals of time and the length of an utterance depends on the number of syllables rather than the number of stresses" (p.576). This difference causes major problems for Turkish learners as it is difficult for them to reduce some parts of sentences when they are uttered, and a one-time explanation followed by limited practice will not be sufficient to overcome this problem.

A good reason not to start teaching English using its written from comes from a study by Khalilzade (2014) in which he refers to English as a non-phonetic language and Turkish a phonetic language. Based on the contrastive analysis he conducted, Khalilzade explains the main source of some pronunciation problems of Turkish EFL learners:

> The source of the problems, in English, is not the pronunciation but the spelling. If a learner is exposed to spoken English, without dealing with its written form, he/she will face no problems in learning it. The problems arise when one is going to learn English as a foreign language in a non - English-speaking environment. The learner, in such a situation, has to use the written form of English much more than

the spoken form and English spelling, due to its high degree of irregularity and being not match with pronunciation, hinders effective learning, hence making problems for the Turkish EFL learners. (pp. 14-15)

In the second section, studies on prospective English language teachers' knowledge of English pronunciation will be presented. The focus of these studies is either teaching segmental and/or suprasegmental aspects of pronunciation or the pronunciation difficulties observed in production. Arslan (2013a) summarizes studies that focus of teaching pronunciation in Turkey as follows:

In Turkey the majority of research studies have investigated segmental features of pronunciation (Çelik, 2008; Demirezen, 2010; Hişmanoğlu & Hişmanoğlu, 2011; Hişmanoğlu, 2012), while focus on suprasegmentals such as stress pattern, rhythm, and intonation has been relatively limited (Çelik, 2001; Seferoğlu, 2005; Demirezen, 2009) (p. 269).

Among the studies that investigate teacher candidates' pronunciation problems at suprasegmental level are two quasi-experimental studies by Arslan (2013a) and (2013b) in which senior students in the ELTE department receive instruction on word stress and sentence stress after their knowledge in those areas were assessed using a pre-test. Arslan (2013a) reports that "rhythm, sentential stress and word stress were the least emphasized ones as part of pronunciation in their undergraduate study." (p.272). Senior ELTE students in that study performed better in producing the segmental phonemes of English and their performance in suprasegmentals was lower. In both studies, after four weeks of training, Arslan reports improvement.

Regarding the studies that focus on ELT students' knowledge of English segmentals, Bardakçı (2015) reports the results of a study that focuses on the mispronunciation of English phonemes produced by 22 prospective English teachers in their freshman year. The students had all attended preparatory school for one year before they started their studies in the ELTE department unlike the participants in this study. In his study, schwa was the most commonly mispronounced phoneme.

The importance of pronunciation and the ability to use spoken language are reported as the two most important needs of prospective EFL teachers in the English language teacher education departments of three state universities in Turkey (Türker, 2012). Based on a needs analysis questionnaire results, the participants state that the present curriculum that is followed in their education emphasizes speaking, listening, and pronunciation only in the preparatory school and their freshman year and also that those courses should continue throughout their studies. Table 1 summarizes student teachers' needs; pronunciation appears as number one among them.

Table 1 *Difficulties experienced by learners*

Type of Difficulty	%
Pronunciation	33,3
Speaking	25,6
Listening	19,2
New words	11,4
Writing	6,3
Grammar	4,2
Total	100

(Türker, 2012, p.15)

In the final part of this section, the problems that stem from teachers in state schools will be discussed. In a study, Özoğlu (2010) states the reasons for the perennial problem of the quality of education in state schools by approaching the issue from a different perspective which includes the examination of teacher recruitment policies and professional development efforts of teachers in the school system. Among the reasons are the policies that allow the employment of the graduates of different faculties instead of faculties of Education as the aim is to compensate the demand for English language teachers. While this practice may have arisen from the shortage of English teachers in the past and may appear justified as a sound policy at the time, employing the person who truly qualifies as an English language teacher should be the main goal of teacher recruitment policy today. A quick comparative glance at the curriculum of ELTE departments and the curricula of other departments such as *English Language and Literature* or *Translation and Interpreting Studies* would easily show that the curricula of the departments other than that of the ELTE does not train their students to teach English at all.

Methodology

Participants

The participants were 56 freshman students in the ELTE department of a state university in Turkey. They were graduates of four different high school types: Anatolian High School, Anatolian Teacher High School, Regular High School, and Vocational High School. The participants were from all geographical regions of Turkey. A sizable number of students were from Anatolian high schools in Adana. Table 2 shows the high school types the students graduated from.

Table 2 *Participants' high school types*

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
	Anatolian High School	32	57,1	57,1	57,1
	Anatolian Teacher High School	6	10,7	10,7	67,9
Valid	Regular High School	17	30,4	30,4	98,2
	Vocational High School	1	1,8	1,8	1,8
	Total	56	100,0	100,0	100

The table shows that not many graduates of Anatolian Teacher High Schools had chosen teaching English as a profession; there were only 6 graduates in the sample (10.7%). The majority of the participants were graduates of Anatolian High Schools n=32 (57.1%). The remaining participants were graduates of Regular High Schools n=17 (30,4%) and Vocational High Schools n=1 (1,7%).

Data Collection Device

A diagnostic listening test was given to participants to assess their knowledge of the segmental and suprasegmental features of English as they became students in the ELTE department. The diagnostic test (Gilbert: 2012) is from a textbook that is used to teach pronunciation and listening comprehension to non-native English learners. The test consists of 65 items to measure learners' knowledge in seven areas: vowels, consonants, syllables, word stress, emphasizing focus words in sentences, de -emphasizing using contractions and reductions, and thought groups. Each of the first six areas consists of 10 items. The final part, thought groups, has 5 items.

To ensure understanding and avoid alternative interpretations, it is helpful to define two of the terms listed above by the designer of the test. Rogerson & Gilbert (1990) define the first one - *thought groups* - as follows, "When we speak, we need to divide speech up into small 'chunks' to help the listener understand messages. These chunks or thought groups are groups of words which go together to express one idea or thought. In English, we use pauses and low pitch to mark the end of thought groups." (p. 54) Gilbert (2012) defines focus words as, "A focus word is the most important word in a thought group. Focus words are emphasized with a pitch change and a long, clear vowel in the stressed syllable to help the listener notice them.

Example: "Follow that car." (p.101)

Data Analysis

In order to be able to assess the participants' knowledge of the English sound system and get an accurate picture, descriptive, non-parametric, and parametric statistical tests were conducted. As the first step of data analysis, descriptive statistics such as frequency and percentages were explored further, and

mode, mean, median, standard deviation, and cross-tabulations were obtained. Cross-tabulation analyses were performed to see whether relationships existed between variables. In order to broaden the dimensions of the analyses, of the non-parametric tests, chi-square tests were performed to see whether the observed differences found in the analyses were statistically significant. Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2007) explain that "Difference testing is an important feature in understanding data….Chi-square statistic addresses the notion of statistical difference" (p. 525). Before the tests were conducted, to determine the *p*-value, the significance level α value was chosen as 5%. Therefore, the criterion was set as α = 0.05, meaning if p<0.05 = a statistically significant difference exists, and if p>0.05 = no statistically significant difference exists. SPSS version 20 was used in data analyses.

Results

To begin, a frequency table of correct answers by the participants will be given to show the extent of entrance level knowledge of the state high school graduate ELTE freshman students.

Table 3 *Number of correct responses by participants*

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
	24.00	2	3.6	3.6	3.6
	26.00	2	3.6	3.6	7.1
	27.00	1	1.8	1.8	8.9
	28.00	1	1.8	1.8	10.7
	29.00	5	8.9	8.9	19.6
	30.00	2	3.6	3.6	23.2
	31.00*	7	12.5	12.5	35.7
	32.00	6	10.7	10.7	46.4
	33.00	5	8.9	8.9	55.4
	34.00	2	3.6	3.6	58.9
Valid	35.00	6	10.7	10.7	69.6
	36.00	2	3.6	3.6	73.2
	37.00	2	3.6	3.6	76.8
	39.00	1	1.8	1.8	78.6
	40.00	2	3.6	3.6	82.1
	41.00	4	7.1	7.1	89.3
	43.00	4	7.1	7.1	96.4
	44.00	1	1.8	1.8	98.2
	47.00	1	1.8	1.8	100.0
	Total	56	100.0	100.0	

*mode = 31.00 (n=7)

The table above is a good indicator of how well the participants knew the segmentals and suprasegmentals of English. The lowest number of correct answers to the 65 items that participants had responded was 24 (n=2) and highest correct score was 47 (n=1). This means that 65=100%, the lowest

score (24) indicates 36,9% and the highest score (47) shows 72,3% knowledge rate. Even the highest score is questionable to be considered satisfactory after years of English instruction in state schools. To explain the vehemence of the picture further, a central tendency score - *mode: the score most respondents obtained* - will be given. Mode is 31,00 (n=7) which indicates a 47,6% knowledge rate, still less than the half - 50%. It also means that freshman teacher candidates come to the ELTE department without knowing the spoken form of English well enough to understand and produce it. It would be optimistic to assume that, with such an inadequate background, student teachers will further their spoken English within the limited number of hours they are exposed to the English language in their university classes.

A second table will also be useful to present the average scores of all participants in terms of their performance in each of the 7 areas of the diagnostic test. The table shows the segmental and suprasegmental knowledge problems of the participants by showing their minimum and maximum number of correct responses in each test area and means.

Table 4 *Participants' Minimum and Maximum Correct responses in 7 test areas and Means*

Total	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean
1. Vowels	56	3.00	10.00	6.6964
2. Consonants	56	5.00	10.00	8.4107
3. Syllables	56	.00	10.00	5.6250
4. Word stress	56	.00	7.00	1.4821
5. Emphasizing focus words	56	.00	8.00	5.2321
6. De-emphasizing	56	.00	7.00	3.0000
7. Thought groups	56	.00	5.00	3.5536
All areas	56	24.00	47.00	34.0000
Valid N (listwise)	56			

Table 4 quantifies participants' weaknesses in terms of numbers. The .00 values for syllables, word stress, emphasizing focus words, de-emphasizing with contractions and reductions, and thought groups show that there was not even one single correct response in those five categories. Minimum number of correct responses appeared in the vowels and consonants sections. This finding is significant in that it shows that Turkish students develop mainly segmental knowledge of the English sound system while their knowledge in other areas shows serious gaps. The means of the 5 areas are also low, word stress being the lowest (M=1.4821).

Table 5 below shows that Turkish students experience the least problems in consonants (x̄: 8.4107). Vowels follow consonants with the second highest mean (x̄: 6.6964). These highest means show that Turkish learners know segmental features of English better than suprasegmentals. As vowels follow the suprasegmentals before consonants, it shows that Turkish learners experience problems in producing and hearing English vowels.

Table 5 is the tabulation of means of students' knowledge in 7 areas from the lowest to the highest.

Table 5 *Participant means from lowest to highest in 7 areas*

Total (Areas)	N	Mean
1.Word stress	56	1.4821
2.De-emphasizing	56	3.0000
3. Thought groups	56	3.5536
4. Emphasizing focus words	56	5.2321
5.Syllables	56	5.6250
6. Vowels	56	6.6964
7. Consonants	56	8.4107
All areas	56	34.0000
Valid N (listwise)	56	

The situation becomes worse in suprasegmentals. Word stress is the lowest (x̄: 1.4821) followed by de-emphasizing with contractions and reductions (x̄: 3.0000). The third lowest area in terms of participant scores is thought groups (x̄: 3.5536). Emphasizing focus words has the fourth lowest score (x̄: 5.2321) and syllables is the final category of suprasegmentals (x̄: 5.6250). These results show that pronunciation teaching must go beyond the traditional minimal pair-like practice of teaching segmentals.

Data analysis included Chi-square tests which were done to find out whether there were statistically significant differences among participants in terms of their high school type and gender. Firstly, the chi-square results for high school type will be given. As was mentioned previously, the participants were the graduates of four different high school types: Anatolian High School, Anatolian Teacher High School, Regular High School, and Vocational High School. The Pearson Chi-Square values for each of the 7 areas are given in Table 6 to present the results.

Table 6 Pearson Chi-Square values in terms of high school type in 7 areas

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
1.Vowels	36,466	21	,019
2. Consonants	7,917	15	,927
3. Syllables	13,868	30	,995
4.Word stress	10,416	18	,917
5.Emphasizing Focus Words	18,969	24	,754
6.De-emphasizing	22,925	21	,348
7.Thought Groups	8,131	15	,918

*p<0.05

The results show that there is no significant difference in categories 2-7. The only statistically significant difference was found in only vowels ($\chi 2$ = 34.466, df = 21, ρ = 0.019). The observed difference in vowels is due to better scores obtained by the graduates of Anatolian High School type. To sum up, the values in the table show that as the participants do not differ from each other in terms of their knowledge according to their high school types, they would all benefit from further instruction.

Secondly, the chi-square results for participants' gender will be presented, in the same format used in Table 6. The results in Table 7 show that, a statistically significant difference is observed only in one area as is the case in school type chi-square test results. However, the difference is in category 6 (de-emphasizing with contractions and reductions) instead of vowels. ($\chi 2$ = 20,726, df = 7, ρ = 0.04).

Table 7 Pearson Chi-Square values in terms of gender in 7 areas

	Value	df	Asymp.Sig. (2-sided)
1.Vowels	12,631	7	,082
2. Consonants	6,827	5	,234
3. Syllables	7,280	10	,699
4.Word stress	8,036	6	,236
5.Emphasizing Focus Words	12,247	8	,141
6.De-emphasizing	20,726	7	,004
7.Thought Groups	6,280	5	,280

*p<0.05

To conclude the analysis of Table 7, the values in the table show that the difference observed occurs only in one area, and that does mean that once again the participants do not differ from each other in terms of their gender. Instruction in all areas would be beneficial to all participants.

Discussion

The results of this study show that freshman English teacher candidates have serious problems regarding the suprasegmentals of English, and they do need instruction on them. As these students will be language teachers in the future, and as language is primarily speech, in order for them to provide an intelligible model of spoken English for their students to speak and comprehend English, they need to receive instruction on connected speech which focuses on the suprasegmental features of the English language as people do not utter individual sounds in their daily lives; they use connected speech. Therefore, connected speech must be introduced from the beginning and practiced abundantly by setting significant time aside for the teaching and practice of English suprasegmentals. Two factors need to be addressed with regard to the establishment and administration of such instruction: time allocated for pronunciation teaching and course content.

The results indicate that pronunciation teaching as a one-year course is not enough for student teachers who believe they cannot speak nor understand English speaking people after years of English instruction in state schools. In terms of producing English speech and comprehending other speakers, Turkish high school graduates are at best at beginner level of language proficiency. A 3-hour-a-week pronunciation course that lasts one academic year is not enough for teacher candidates with such educational background in English. In two 14-week semesters, the students receive a total of 84 hours of instruction. In addition, it is rare for a student to attend all of the weekly classes in one course. Therefore, a one-year course is not enough for teacher candidates to acquire and internalize new information which they will use for professional purposes in the future. More time is necessary for students to become better at speaking English and understanding other speakers. To that end, pronunciation teaching for prospective English language teachers should continue for two years and begin at beginner level for the first year of teaching and continue at intermediate level for the second year. Course books that teach English pronunciation at beginner and intermediate levels are readily available in the market.

Content of the pronunciation course book is also important as the main textbook is the general guide for teaching and learning in a classroom setting. Students in ELTE departments are trained to be teachers, not phoneticians, nor phonologists. For the selection of course books for pronunciation courses in those departments, in order to aid learning and contribute to the permanence of new knowledge, books

that aim to equip student teachers with practical and easy to understand information which accurately and clearly indicate the use of connected speech with vivid examples without burdening them with information they do not need for their professional purposes should be chosen. A number of such course books are also available in the market.

In order to promote the development of accurate and intelligible pronunciation in prospective teachers, in addition to standard tests like KPSS and field knowledge test, recruitment for English teachers must also include a speaking test. In other words, the English language teacher recruitment process should include two steps: an initial paper-pencil exam and a speaking exam for those who have successfully passed the first phase. This must be implemented without delay because teaching English is not a matter of multiple-choice only. In multiple-choice tests, test-takers recognize the correct answer; no production is required. On the other hand, teachers of English have to speak English because they are the primary sources of input for their students. They have to speak English in order to provide an intelligible version of the English language in their classes. Standards should be set for the assessment of prospective teachers' speaking performance with a pre-set score that marks acceptable command of spoken English. Student teachers' course grade in the Listening and Pronunciation courses should be one of the criteria that affect their speaking assessment in the second phase.

Last but not least, the Ministry of Education should recruit only the graduates of ELTE programs. Currently, the graduates of other departments are eligible to becoming English teachers, but the content of the undergraduate curricula they follow throughout the course of their education and the content of the certification courses they take fall significantly short of preparing those graduates for teaching English.

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