

Original Research

The Importance of Teaching Academic Reading Strategies to First-Year Multilingual Extended Degree Students at a South African University

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to report on the findings from a study that was conducted to investigate academic reading problems in a South African university among first-year multilingual extended degree students. The paper particularly explores if it is helpful to teach academic reading strategies to first-year extended degree students. A case study design and a qualitative research approach were used to collect and analyse data for this study. Interviews were used to collect data from two lecturers. Focus group discussions and an open-ended questionnaire were used to collect data from 48 students. The study found that it is beneficial to teach academic reading strategies to first-year extended degree students. Among others, summarizing, note-making and text evaluation skills were proven to be helpful. However, because of the low levels of reading proficiency among these students, more and continuous reading support needs to be provided. For this reason, we recommend establishing structured reading discussion programmes to coordinate additional academic reading platforms that can help enhance first-year students' reading abilities.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Academic reading is central to successful learning at the higher education level. However, many students who are admitted to the extended degree programmes in universities tend to lack academic reading proficiency. In the institution in which this study was conducted, students who are enrolled in the Extended Degree Programme do not meet the entry requirements for mainstream programmes (Machika, 2012; Pearce et al., 2015). These students are enrolled as at-risk students because their level of proficiency in English is deemed to be inadequate for the demands of academic learning at the tertiary level. The extended degree programmes are thus designed to provide intensive contact with these at-risk students to help them develop the academic skills required to cope with the high demands of tertiary education (Machika, 2012; Jacobs et al., 2015). Existing research indicates that reading at the tertiary level demands flexible and independent learning where students are required to interact with reading texts from different sources independently and effectively (Bharuthram, 2012; Jacobs et al., 2015; Ranjbar & Nasiri, 2024). As part of the Extended Degree Programme in the institution in which this study was conducted, these students are enrolled in an English course which is offered to all first-year students. This course is situated in Undergraduate Programmes under the Bachelor of Arts (BA) (General & Extended), which offers majors in languages, psychology, sociology, philosophy,

history, and communication studies. All these undergraduate programmes are offered in the Faculty of Humanities at the university. Among other things, the purpose of the English course is to help students improve their academic reading proficiency so that they can cope with academic reading and writing tasks expected of them at this level. Among other components of the English course, students are taught academic reading strategies, which are deemed necessary for the enhancement of academic reading proficiency. This paper then explores the extent to which these academic reading strategies are beneficial in enhancing students' academic reading skills.

The objectives of the study were:

- a) To identify the different academic reading strategies used by multilingual first-year extended degree students to engage with academic texts.
- b) To determine how reading strategies used by first-year extended degree students help to improve their academic reading skills.

The study was guided by the following research questions:

- a) Do first-year extended degree students find the academic reading strategies helpful?
- b) How do these strategies improve the students' development of critical academic reading skills?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Research highlights that most first-year students tend to experience challenges with academic reading. Most of them seem to be unable to cope with the level of reading required in higher education, which is much more complex and demanding than reading at the school level (Liao, 2011; Bharuthram, 2012). Research further indicates that most students struggle with academic reading due to a lack of critical reading skills required for the application and construction of knowledge (Park et al., 2012; Frăsineanu, 2013). Hezam et al. (2022) assert that most university students experience reading as a challenge because of inadequate vocabulary. The reading problems that are identified among most first-year students seem to originate from their early levels of education. Pretorius and Klapwijk (2016) argue that the reading problems originate at the primary level of schooling, where it seems that the instruction on reading for comprehension does not get the attention it deserves. The Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) and the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) corroborate this research evidence by indicating that most learners in South Africa perform badly in Literacy, Mathematics and Sciences (Clase et al., 2007; Christie, 2010; Van der Berg et al., 2011; Jensen, 2013). The 2011 PIRLS report, for instance, indicates that most Grade 5 learners in South African schools lack the basic skills required for reading at an equivalent international Grade 4 level (Van der Berg et al., 2011; Nkosi, 2012). A similar view is shared by Bharuthram (2012), who argues that despite various attempts by the government to improve literacy levels in the country, reports of low literacy levels and reading problems are still common among most university students. The reading deficiency seems to be left unaddressed until students reach tertiary education.

The reading problem is further compounded by the fact that most students seem to have low proficiency levels in English, which is the predominant language of instruction at all levels of schooling in South Africa (Pretorius & Klapwijk, 2016; Andrianatos, 2019). Pineteh (2014) argues that most South African university students from previously marginalised and underprivileged backgrounds are often not intellectually and emotionally prepared for higher education and therefore struggle to cope with the reading demands in academia. Andrianatos (2019) argues that the South African school system does not adequately prepare students for university learning. Students seem to experience challenges with academic reading due to reading problems that seem to remain unaddressed at the school level. The inadequate reading proficiency at the school level is not only a local concern. In a study conducted in an Ethiopian context, Mulatu and Regassa (2022) highlight that most teachers do not teach reading in high schools, and yet reading is critical for academic success, especially at university, where the reading demand is high. It is thus imperative that institutions of higher learning devise strategies that can help to bridge the reading gap that first-year students tend to have.

Various studies have been conducted on academic reading strategies among first-year students, both in local and international contexts. Yüksel & Yüksel (2012), Magogwe (2013), and Zhang & Seepho (2013) have conducted studies that point out the importance of metacognitive reading strategies in helping to improve students' academic reading skills. This finding is corroborated by a study conducted by Molotja (2020) in the South African context. The findings in Molotja's (2020) study indicate that successful students use various metacognitive reading strategies when reading academic texts. A study by Saengpakdeejit & Intaraprasert (2014) investigated the strategies used by English Foreign Language (EFL) undergraduate students to improve their reading comprehension, solve problems encountered during reading, and to overcome their difficulties in comprehension. The findings revealed that the participants were aware that reading English texts at tertiary level is a complex process, so they needed to employ various strategies to overcome reading comprehension difficulties. Several studies that highlight the high prevalence of reading problems among first-year students have been conducted in the South African context (Bharuthram, 2012; Bozalek & Boughey, 2012; Yafele,

2021). These scholars suggest that various reading strategies should be incorporated in university classrooms to help enhance reading comprehension among first-year students. In a nutshell, studies conducted in local and international contexts reveal that most students are aware that they need to use various reading strategies to extract meaning from the sophisticated texts they encounter at university.

First-year university students thus need to be taught various academic reading strategies to help them improve reading proficiency in English, which is predominantly used as a language of instruction at the tertiary level (Klapwijk, 2011; Zimmerman, 2014; Zimmerman & Smit, 2014; Pretorius & Klapwijk, 2016). Effective reading at university depends on the reader's ability to use knowledge of the world and knowledge of other texts to interrogate and challenge the meanings portrayed in a text (Boughey & McKenna, 2016). This research evidence implies that the teaching of reading strategies is critical to help students develop higher-order thinking skills, which can help them engage in meaning construction to grasp the hidden ideas in a text (Zin et al., 2014). The teaching of reading strategies aligns with research that propagates that students should be equipped with analytical and reflective skills, which may enable them to critically unpack ideas hidden between lines and extract meaning from various texts (Antonyan & Bekaryan, 2015; Boughey & McKenna, 2016). Equipping students with academic reading strategies enables effective academic reading.

It is imperative that reading problems which students tend to manifest are not ignored since reading deficiencies can critically affect university students' academic success (Van Dyk et al., 2013). By applying reading strategies, students can interrogate and understand complex features in academic texts, which include efficient, interactive, strategic, flexible, and purposeful learning and linguistic processing (Grabe & Stoller, 2011; Grabe & Stoller, 2014; Yurko & Protsenko, 2020). Furthermore, students should be taught to understand that all complex reading abilities are interrelated to support readers in achieving the goal of reading, which entails the full understanding of a particular text (Grabe & Stoller, 2014; Yurko & Protsenko, 2020). Considering the complexities of academic reading, it is crucial that first-year extended degree students are taught academic reading skills to equip them with the skills required to cope with the demands of academic reading (Irkinovich & Izatullaevna, 2022). Mulatu & Regassa (2022) affirm that students should practice reading different texts by using various reading strategies to improve their reading abilities. With developed reading abilities, students can approach reading from a critical perspective and effectively access the complex texts they encounter at university.

Making students aware of various academic strategies would assist them in understanding academic reading as a multi-level process that involves an active interaction with different voices portrayed in the texts. They would finally learn to interpret the content flexibly to suit the purposes of academic writing tasks (Zamel & Spack, 2012). This interactive process can only happen if students possess adequate academic reading skills and are familiar with various strategies that they can apply when engaging with academic texts (Mulatu & Regassa, 2022). There are several benefits to teaching academic reading strategies to first-year extended degree students. For instance, it helps them transition to reading at university level (Hussein, 2012) and to read for critical engagement and application (Chi & Wylie, 2014; Dieu, 2015). Teaching various reading strategies to first-year extended degree students assists in equipping them with the fundamental skills they require for academic success. Nourdad & Asghari (2017) argue that to effectively enhance academic reading, students should be encouraged to vary their reading strategies when engaging with academic texts. Employing various academic reading strategies helps students to cope with reading large volumes of texts during their search for information for assigned tasks. Given the heavy demand for reading at university, teaching relevant academic reading strategies may help improve the reading abilities of first-year extended degree students and assist them in becoming active and effective academic readers.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study was framed from a critical pedagogical theory perspective. According to Chalaune (2021), the theory is said to have first been introduced by the Frankfurt School, established in 1923, whilst Giroux (2010) claims that it was propounded by Paulo Freire in the 1970s. Critical pedagogy has its roots in critical theory and is grounded in Marxist and phenomenological philosophies (Bishop, 2014). McKernan (2013) discusses critical pedagogy from Freire's notion of conscientisation as a movement that involves relationships of teaching and learning that create space for students to gain critical self-consciousness and social awareness so that they can take appropriate action against oppressive forces. Critical pedagogy advocates for a dialogical approach to literacy based on the principles of reciprocal exchange (Luke, 2012). From a critical pedagogical perspective, academic reading is described as the ability to interactively engage with content by going beyond a text. The idea of going beyond a text implies that by using various reading strategies, the student does not end at the level of decoding words but goes beyond to unpack the ideologies hidden between sentences (Kincheloe et al., 2011). Arguing from a critical pedagogical lens, lecturers and students should partner in research and work towards the creation and the re-creation of knowledge (Kincheloe et al., 2011; Elleman & Compton, 2017) as they unpack the hidden thoughts they encounter in academic texts. Boughey & McKenna

(2016) assert that for comprehension to be achieved, students should engage in a dialogue with the author and other voices in a text as they negotiate meanings and interpretations of the world based on the content. The theory implies that the reader should go beyond the understanding that meaning is socially constructed within texts to understand the political and economic implications embedded in the content of those texts.

4. METHODOLOGY

A qualitative research approach was used to carry out this study. The South African university in which the study was conducted is a public, multilingual higher education institution that uses English as a medium of instruction. The use of other local languages like Afrikaans, Sesotho, and IsiZulu is also promoted at the university. The case study design was used to explore the academic reading strategies taught to a cohort of first-year extended degree students who were enrolled in an English course in the year 2020 and to examine how helpful these strategies were in enhancing their reading skills. This English course is offered to all first-year students and is situated in the Faculty of Humanities under the Bachelor of Arts (BA) (General & Extended), which offers majors in various subjects, including languages, psychology, sociology, philosophy, history, and communication studies. The first-year extended degree students enrolled in the Faculty of Humanities come from diverse educational and socio-linguistic backgrounds since the university accepts students from all South African provinces and from international contexts.

A purposive sampling method was used to select a sample of two lecturers who had vast experience in teaching academic reading strategies to first-year extended degree students in the Department of English. Convenience sampling was used to select a representative sample of forty-eight (48) first-year extended degree students from the 2020 cohort who gave their consent to participate in the study. Interviews were used to collect data from two (2) lecturers, and focus group discussions and an open-ended questionnaire were used to collect data from the 48 first-year extended degree students. The 48 students were divided into six groups, and these formed the focus groups, which consisted of eight participants each. The focus groups were small enough to allow all members to actively engage and participate during the interview discussions (Krueger & Casey, 2015).

The data obtained through interviews, focus group discussions, and the open-ended questionnaire were first transcribed and then analysed qualitatively, using the thematic and authentic narrative analysis (Creswell, 2016; Creswell, 2021). Terry et al. (2017) describe thematic analysis as a qualitative approach that identifies themes in qualitative data. Thematic analysis advocates for a flexible approach to coding data and developing themes, and the purpose of coding is to find supporting evidence for the themes (ibid). In the study, the transcribed data were analysed to identify recurring patterns of ideas, a process which involved examining codes by combining and collapsing them into more meaningful patterns.

The analysis was done to make sense of the data, and as propounded by Terry et al. (2017), the researcher followed the process of coding the data to develop insight and to provide a rigorous and thorough foundation of what the data meant. To align with qualitative research, the transcribed data were coded to form categories and patterns, which were then arranged into themes (Creswell, 2016; Miles et al., 2018; Creswell, 2021). The authentic narrative analysis was utilised in the process of data interpretation. This process of analysis involved selecting quotations from the participants' responses that addressed the research questions. These quotations helped to give a thick description of the narratives that were extracted from the participants' responses that represented their views (Lewis & Adeney, 2014; Bamberg, 2020). The established themes were then interpreted against the reviewed literature to get a picture of how helpful the teaching of academic reading strategies was in improving the first-year extended degree students' reading abilities.

5. FINDINGS

The following discussion outlines the findings that were extracted from data obtained from the first-year extended degree students. Focus group discussions and an open-ended questionnaire were used for data collection. Participants were asked the following questions:

- (a) Do you find the reading strategies taught in the English course useful in your reading experiences in your studies?
- (b) Briefly explain why you think the reading strategies taught in the English course are useful or not useful for your reading needs

All participants who participated in the focus group discussions and those who completed the questionnaire indicated that they found the strategies helpful and that the techniques equipped them with the ability to critically engage with academic texts. The following responses from participants reveal how they benefited from the strategies taught in the English course.

5.1. Responses from lecturers

The lecturers reported that the main strategies that were taught to first-year extended degree students included skimming, scanning, text annotation, summarising, synthesising, and text evaluation.

5.2. Responses from students

'It was helpful because I learnt a lot of things that I didn't know, and the strategies helped me to read and write better. The various strategies I learnt included annotating and summarizing.'

'... I learned to skim and scan for the information from texts, which is quite useful'.

'The strategies teach me to look at the text as a whole and become impartial when reading it.'

'The strategies are helpful because they're very clear and easy to follow. The strategies encourage purposeful reading, which helps to boost interest in reading academic texts.'

'Currently, I know I am the best text reader because of the strategies I was taught in the English course. The way I read texts, I read for understanding and gaining some knowledge and information. They are very useful because I can summarise and annotate texts better.'

'The strategies have taught me how to identify important parts of the text I'm reading.'

'I can use the skills learnt in the English course to read texts in different courses.'

'The strategies taught in the English course are useful, because if I compare my reading experience from high school and how I read now, I realise that I have improved a lot. These strategies make it easier for me to understand what I am reading and why I am reading'

'I find text evaluation helpful because now I know what I'm supposed to look for when I'm reading, instead of having to sit and struggle for hours just to come up with one source. It has become easier to find sources.'

The participants' responses to the open-ended questionnaire and the focus group interviews confirmed the responses received from the interviews with the lecturers. The responses from the lectures indicated that the various reading strategies taught were helpful in enhancing reading abilities among the first-year extended degree students. The lecturers highlighted skimming, scanning, text annotation, summarising, synthesising and text evaluation as the main strategies that were taught and practiced with first-year extended degree students. The responses to the three instruments used indicate that the reading strategies taught are not only helpful in the English course, but also in the other courses the students are studying.

6. DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

The findings revealed that the various reading strategies taught to first-year extended degree students included skimming, scanning, summarising, annotation, note-making, active reading and text evaluation skills. Each of these skills plays a critical role in helping students develop academic reading proficiency. Several students mentioned learning to skim, scan and annotate texts as being beneficial when engaging in academic reading. It is important not to overlook the significance of teaching basic strategies like skimming, scanning and annotation to first-year extended degree students since these skills are foundational to successful in-depth reading of academic texts. It should become easier for students to engage in more advanced strategies like in-depth reading, note-making, summarising, synthesising and text evaluation skills if these foundational skills are well-developed. Advanced strategies like in-depth reading are critical in helping students interrogate and break down the ideas portrayed in academic texts. Bishop (2014) corroborates these findings by indicating that when students approach academic texts, they should become border crossers. This means that students should not be limited to what they read and accept an author's view at face value but should become critical thinkers who go beyond the text to unpack the critical elements hidden between the lines. This observation aligns with the critical pedagogical perspective which challenges academic readers to interactively engage with the text by breaking down complex ideas using various reading strategies to go beyond decoding words in a text to unpack the ideologies hidden between sentences (Kincheloe et al., 2011).

The active or in-depth approach to reading also correlates with the critical thinking theorists' view, which argues that an effective reader should actively interact with the different voices portrayed in texts and

finally, interpret the content flexibly to unearth the meanings hidden between words (Zamel & Spack, 2012; Liccardo et al., 2015; Boughey & McKenna, 2016). The development of the ability to interpret the content aligns with the reflective and analytical reading theorists who claim that academic reading requires reflective thinking which involves the pulling and pushing of concepts, that is, putting them together and separating them again to deduce new meanings from words (Novak et al., 2013; Boughey & McKenna, 2016; Nourdad & Asghari, 2017). The reflective reading approach implies that when reading texts at university, students should not follow a linear process, but should engage in a dialogue, where they identify key concepts, question their purpose, and then go back to scrutinise their relevance in the text and further question how the concepts contribute to the extraction of new meanings. The reading strategies taught to first-year extended degree students equip these students with the skills they require to engage in a dialogue with the author and other voices in a text as they negotiate meanings and interpretations of the world to better understand the content (Boughey & McKenna, 2016). To effectively engage in a dialogue with the author and other voices in a text requires students to work in groups so that they can share the different thoughts that emerge as they interrogate the content. Since the tertiary classrooms are linguistically diverse, the students can utilise their linguistic repertoires to get to the depth of the texts as they engage in reading discussions using their home languages and then switch to English when they share their thoughts to the class. For this reason, the various reading strategies taught become beneficial to students as they are trained to critically break down the content and extract meaning from various texts, a practice that improves their reading abilities. The students' active participation in breaking down the content builds their academic reading confidence and creates space for their partnership with the lecturers in reading discussions that can build new knowledge.

Text evaluation emerged as beneficial to the students' understanding that texts are written for various purposes. The findings revealed that text evaluation helps students to be able to select and find scholarly sources that are relevant to their purpose of reading. The findings also indicated that the strategy helps students to understand how to reference properly. Existing research corroborates these findings by indicating that text evaluation skills help students to understand the importance of using credible information from scholarly sources (Tenopir et al., 2016). Zin et al. (2014) assert that university students should possess analytical skills which empower them with the ability to evaluate information contained in academic texts they encounter daily. Helping first-year extended degree students develop text evaluation skills is also critical because it enhances their ability to critique various texts and enables them to develop sound academic arguments by using credible evidence from relevant sources (Currie et al., 2010; Leeder & Shah, 2016). Text evaluation is, therefore, a critical skill that enhances the students' analytical and reflective skills as they engage with various texts and subsequently improves their academic reading skills.

Another skill that emerged from the findings as a crucial reading strategy is note-making. Note-making creates space for students to be actively involved in the reading process as they identify key ideas and develop connecting points to help improve their comprehension. The findings revealed that the students were taught to write notes as they engage in active reading, so that they can process and understand the key ideas of the texts they read. According to Bahrami & Nosratzadeh (2017), note-taking is a critical skill that helps students gather and retain information from texts better. This happens because students may have to memorise the information and may need it later (ibid). The first-year extended degree students found the technique helpful because making notes helped to increase their ability to pay attention to the material they were reading, which increased their comprehension ability (Özçakmak, 2019). Notes are taken with the aim of aiding a deeper understanding, long-term learning, and reviewing previous knowledge (ibid). Godfrey (2023) asserts that reading and making notes are fundamental skills that are critical for studying at the university level, as students are expected to be active scholars who take responsibility for their learning (ibid). This means that as students read, they should be able to actively and purposefully take note of the key points to help them understand the meanings contained in the texts, thereby improving their reading abilities.

The benefits that are associated with the teaching of reading strategies align with the views of the researchers who argue that students should be equipped with analytical and reflective skills to assist them in being able to critically unpack ideas hidden between the lines and to extract meaning from various texts (Antonyan & Bekaryan, 2015; Boughey & McKenna, 2016). The findings indicate that students benefit from being taught academic reading strategies because even if academic texts are more demanding, the ability to vary their reading strategies helps them to unpack even the most difficult concepts in texts. Research indicates that active reading allows students to be able to consciously deduce the author's intentions and purpose in a text (Bharuthram, 2012; Miller & Merdian, 2020). Antonyan & Bekaryan (2015) assert that academic reading requires a critical approach to break down texts into interrelated components, with the purpose of extracting the author's intentions and ambitions. For example, Allen & McNamara (2020), in *Handbook of Reading Research V*, argue that critical reading approaches are the reader's ability to devise more coherent mental representations, which happens through actively presenting logical interpretations of the content in academic writing.

It emerged from the findings that teaching reading strategies proves to be helpful not only in enhancing the first-year extended degree students' reading skills but also their academic writing skills. This happens because reading and writing are interrelated processes. Students can generate new knowledge and develop well-reasoned judgements provided they can effectively access information from different texts, which happens primarily through reading (Bharuthram, 2012). When students develop the skills to read for comprehension and reasoning, such skills enable them to produce sound and logically written arguments. Bharuthram (2012) further attests to the interconnectedness between the teaching of reading and claims that reading is taught most effectively with writing as an integral process. This implies that the ability to produce a sound written argument can only be achieved if students are able to break down academic materials and effectively access meaning from the content; an ability which depends on having well-developed academic reading skills. In a nutshell, the reading strategies taught to first-year extended degree students are not only helpful in the English course but are fundamental skills that students require to read texts effectively and write effectively for academic purposes.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

First-year extended degree students need to be taught academic reading strategies to open a path to success in their academic career and beyond. Whilst the English programme teaches students these valuable strategies, the interventions, provided only at the first-year level, are insufficient due to gaps in the reading proficiency of students. It is thus recommended that additional and continuous reading development interventions be introduced throughout the undergraduate programmes of study to help students engage in academic discussions that can improve their academic learning abilities. There is also a need to place equal value on the teaching of reading skills to first-year university students to enhance their critical reading skills, as is done with the teaching of writing skills through writing centers. The writing problems or challenges that students seem to depict could be caused by deficiencies in their academic reading proficiency. Promoting and encouraging additional coordinated academic reading platforms and establishing structured reading discussion programmes could inadvertently help mitigate reading challenges that multilingual first-year extended students experience.

8. LIMITATIONS OF THE BIGGER STUDY

The study only involved a single case of one cohort of first-year extended degree students in one South African university. This means recommendations that are applicable to other first-year students or other universities cannot be made. Further research should focus on investigating the helpfulness of academic reading strategies taught to all first-year students at a university to get a broader perspective on how these students' reading abilities can be enhanced to improve their academic success.

9. CONCLUSION

The teaching of reading strategies to first-year extended degree students is very critical as it builds a strong foundation for effective academic reading. Therefore, lecturers should not leave the students to acquire reading skills by chance. Well-developed reading skills, which students acquire through practicing these reading strategies, help lay a foundation for academic success beyond the English course in which these skills are taught. Among the many benefits of teaching academic reading strategies to students is the enhancement of reading for comprehension and argumentation, which are two vital skills needed for academic success. Equipping students with academic reading skills helps them to approach academic texts from different angles to achieve cognitive benefits from reading. In a nutshell, there is value in teaching reading strategies to first-year students so that they become skillful and critical readers who can eventually expand the body of knowledge by sharing their new interpretations derived from various academic texts.

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DECLARATION OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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ETHICAL STATEMENT

The researcher applied for ethical approval from the Ethics Committee, Faculty of Humanities at the university and the ethics consent was granted. The ethics approval number is REC-01-182-2020. Before participating in the study, the participants were requested to complete confirmation of their consent. The researcher explained the issues of informed consent, voluntary participation, right to withdraw, confidentiality and anonymity in the information letters that were sent to participants with information about the purpose of the study.

AI USE STATEMENT

The authors declare that no generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools were used in the preparation, analysis, or writing of this manuscript.

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