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A Qualitative Evaluation of the Impact of Online Visually-Based L2 Acquisition on College Students' Risk-Taking, Motivation, and Anxiety

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Abstract

The paper deals with the topic of visually based L2 acquisition in higher education and evaluates the impact of the use of visual images based on Kolb's theory of experiential learning. It evaluates its impact on the students' risk-taking, motivation and anxiety. The research was conducted at the English Department of the University of Diyala, Iraq. The total number of participants was forty ($n = 40$) and they all were first-year students at English Department. The research was conducted by using guided interviews through the Google Meet platform. The main idea of the research was to evaluate how much will experiential learning, via the reading pictures technique, influence college students' risk-taking, motivation, and anxiety. The research results show that students' motivation and risk-taking were affected positively by using pictures. It further shows that the classroom anxiety of the students was less affected than the other two variables.

Keywords: L2 acquisition, foreign language learning, EFL, ESL, risk-taking, motivation, anxiety, applied linguistics, psycholinguistics

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1. Introduction

The use of visual elements is generally considered to be a significant component in foreign language teaching and second language (L2) acquisition and the cutting-edge research has proved its relevance not only for L2 acquisition but for the large variety of other educational activities where it can be very useful and beneficial (Martínez-García, 2019; Koutsikou et al., 2021; González-Zamar et al., 2020). Currently, we are experiencing a significant surge in digital learning due to the COVID-19 pandemics that has changed many teaching paradigms in favor of digital learning. Since the focus on the communicative abilities of the students represents a challenge in online education, visually based L2 acquisition, i.e. the use of picture-based language learning seems suitable, mostly for vocabulary development (Al-Obaydi, 2020a) because the visual exposure to an object to be memorized creates a stronger link in the brain than just a verbal representation as cognitive science and psychology confirms in numerous research (Derakhshan, 2021; Nation, 2001; Wang & Hemchua, 2022). Moreover, it is very convenient and natural to use visual objects online; therefore, it is much easier to implement this visual aspect of learning into any kind, or most, of online L2 teaching despite the fact that it can be a challenge for online educators (Graddol, 1997; Roell, 2010).

Kolbs' theory of experiential learning was utilized to verify the efficiency of possibility and efficiency of visually based L2 acquisition in higher education as it is reflected by the users themselves by their subjective satisfaction or dissatisfaction. Kolbs' theory of experiential learning focuses mainly on the relationships between learning and development, and also learning styles. Kolb's ideas pay attention to the essential role of creating real experiences for learning in a class. In this respect, he mentioned that "learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (1984, 38). The theory consists of a cycle of four stages in relation to four learning styles. These stages include to experience at first, reflect on what you learn from the experience, generalize the ideas you learn, and finally a test (Cowan 1998). The choice of Kolb's theory as a road map in the present study is due to the need to take into account the individual differences among the learners, and to gain the best results using the four mentioned cyclical steps. Also, the theory seems to be very useful for any L2 acquisition that

uses a cooperative and communication approaches.

The difference of this study compared to other studies is that it is related to generating oral comments from the participants not just letting them passing the pictures by watching as in the case of textbooks. The reason why this methodology was applied was that it is suited for encouraging students to speak voluntarily and promote more experiential vocabulary acquisition by themselves, and as such it can be utilized in higher education when conducted online as online language learning naturally relies heavily on the utilization of images and various pictures. Therefore, this seemingly obsolete method must be tested again in the modern environment, i.e. online learning, because it can bring many challenges and benefits.

The topic of visually based L2 acquisition is covered by vast research but the present one adds a few aspects that are worth analyzing, namely, Kolb's theory and the impact on risk-taking, motivation and anxiety in online L2 acquisition. It also focuses on applying this technique in online education which is utilized as a result of the COVID 19 pandemic. Previous studies usually focus merely on memory and retention in relation to visually based L2 acquisition but the current one brings a new perspective that has not been analyzed yet.

With the little chances provided to the EFL college students in online education regarding their interaction and oral communication, this study is an attempt to investigate the effects of visually based L2 acquisition in online teaching on EFL college students' risk-taking, motivation, and anxiety by using the afore-mentioned Kolbs' theory of experiential learning, and it attempts to evaluate their experience connected to these three tested parameters, i.e. risk-taking, motivation and anxiety. It intends also to analyze the students' attitudes towards visually based L2 acquisition in online teaching by answering the research questions as follows:

1. How much will the visually based L2 acquisition, using Kolbs' theory of experiential learning, affect the EFL college students' risk-taking?
2. How much will the visually based L2 acquisition, using Kolbs' theory of experiential learning, affect the EFL college students' motivation?
3. How much will the visually based L2 acquisition, using Kolbs' theory of experiential learning, affect the EFL college students' anxiety?

4. What are the attitudes of students towards visually based L2 acquisition in online language education?

2. Literature review

Learning new words is always one of the biggest challenges of L2 acquisition and evidence proves that a variety of learning contexts can support their long-term retention (Janebi Enayat & Derakhshan, 2021; Hayakawa et al., 2020; Klimova & Polakova, 2020), which is a very important aspect of any language education as new words and their ability of recollection is a must for any successful language use and communication. Memorizing, retaining and retrieving vocabulary are essential phases both in L1 and L2 acquisition, and all available tools to enhance these three aspects must be evaluated from the viewpoint of psycholinguistics, TEFL and learning psychology (Nation, 2001). Various psychological and psycholinguistic research proves that exposure to visual images can stimulate the brain much more than just a plain verbal explanation of the word in its or even outside its context just in a textbook or other verbal expression. The reasons why it is so is that visual images are intuitive, easy to understand, and we all know that learning a new word is easier when there is a physical (or quasi-physical, such as a picture) representation of it. This is well-known from an L1 acquisition where we face physical objects, or their representations in books in the form of pictures, while we are acquiring new words in our mother tongue. A study by Philominraj et al. (2017) which was applied on 504 students using visual-based learning indicated that visual learning is an essential part of the overall experience that the learners gain towards their process of language learning and it is an important source of information and interaction for the learners, ensuring that their needs, necessities, and goals are met, and that actual learning is achieved through involving them (Derakhshan & Shakki, 2018).

From a psycholinguistic point of view, reading pictures in language teaching, or as stated by Corder (1966) “talking about images”, has an essential impact on learners ‘cognitive and behavioral engagement, enthusiasm, classroom interaction, confidence, and motivation. So, the focus on deeper exposure of the new words

potentially resulting to better acquisition and retention (Hiebert et al., 2019). All these aspects affect in turn the self-actualization of the learners in class, leading them to enhance their self-satisfaction, which subsequently will naturally lead to their better L2 acquisition. If these psychological aspects are achieved, they could create an ideal positive class environment full of motivation but it will also bring several challenging moments as it will naturally involve peer work that is evidently one of the strongest impetus to improvement and cooperative communication (Quinn et al., 2018).

From an applied linguistic perspective, letting learners talk about a specific image means to give them a chance to test their productive language abilities voluntarily, to exercise and improve their pronunciation one by one, and to work on correcting their errors by themselves, to use their schematic knowledge, and make a balance between their linguistic and communicative competencies. Surprisingly, this approach does not need to be reserved only to very low levels of L2, such as beginners or pre-intermediate students, but it can be implemented into higher education as well where the students are on intermediate or even upper-intermediate levels of their L2. Moreover, at the university level, instructors can use this technique in almost all subjects related to ESL or EFL. Naturally, it will probably be more suitable for and easily implemented in lower levels of the given language, such as pre-intermediate or intermediate, but various textbooks intentionally, or almost exclusively, visually based L2 acquisition is available also for advanced students (such as *English Vocabulary in Use – Advanced*, by Cambridge University Press) and they tend to be very popular and widely used. Generally, the implementation of visually based L2 acquisition or any similar kind of graphic representations of language realities is present in basically all modern global EFL and ESL textbooks that are in use these days by basic, high school and university students (see almost all ESL textbooks from Oxford University Press and Cambridge University Press, just to name a few, the most used ones). It is almost impossible to find an L2 textbook that would be only text-based now. Muñoz and Hidalgo (2013) suggested guidelines on the need of taking specific aspects into account while nurturing oral abilities in English as a foreign language student. The study demonstrated the importance of improving oral communication in Chilean

EFL classrooms through visual aids and intelligible input, and considered the actual situation for teaching and learning.

An exposure to visually-based language learning is a part of immersive L2 acquisition that can be further developed into various much more advanced formats, such as immersive virtual reality (Legault et al., 2019) and other kinds of modern formats that use modern technological trends for language education. It can be used just as an aid or as a support in the teaching process (Donaghy & Xerri, 2017), or it can even be used as a standalone tool to maintain valuable language education, but further research is needed to verify its usefulness, convenience and efficiency in language education.

Therefore, the current research paper attempts to evaluate potential benefits, or drawbacks, from the viewpoint of English as a second language (ESL), English as a foreign language (EFL), or teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL), and also provide relevant evaluation of the implementation of this methodology into various kinds of L2 acquisition.

3. Methodology

The research was conducted at the English Department of the University of Diyala, Iraq. The number of participants was forty (n=40), both male and female equally distributed, all of them first-year students of English as their major. Their age was between 18 and 22 years, none of them had English as their L1 and their level of English was between B2 and C1 based on the standardized ECTS classification.

All the participants agreed with taking part in the research by their written consent and the study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the University of Hradec Kralove no. 2/2021. No personal data were collected about the participants and GDPR was fully observed during the experiment.

At first, the researchers use four steps of Kolbs' theory in applying the experiment:

- Concrete Experience (feeling) (CE)

- Reflective Observation (watching) (RO)
- Abstract Conceptualization (thinking) (AC)
- Active Experimentation (doing) (AE)

The instrument used to collect data for this research was an online observational interview based on the guidelines of the three adapted tools as follows. The interview consisted of ten yes/no questions with their justification for each reply. The respondents were asked these questions in a random order so as not to create a cluster of the same or similar questions. Then, the answers were put back into the following clusters. The first three questions were related to risk-taking and were adapted from Luft (2007). The other three questions were adapted from Shi (2014), and intended to measure the students' motivation. The anxiety analysis items were adapted from the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) by (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986). The last interview question was related to students' attitudes towards visually based L2 acquisition where we wanted to generate a summary of their subjective experience which was very useful and explanatory. The time for the interview was one hour with each respondent. The interviews were conducted by the researchers and recorded for later analysis.

The researchers applied the experiment, i.e. implemented visually based L2 acquisition, during the second semester of the academic year 2020-2021, in the first stage students' daily lectures, at the English Department of the University of Diyala, Iraq. The subject where these pictures were used was English as a Foreign Language. *Book 2, Real Listening and Speaking* were used throughout the course. The units of the book revolve around helping the students to listen and speak when using the dialogues related to different topics, such as getting to know other people, calling home with an inquiry, buying tickets, and various other real-life scenarios generally found in similar books covering EFL. Each unit consists of a written and recorded dialogue and several related exercises that should test understanding but also the vocabulary retention. After the students finished each unit, the researchers showed the students a specific picture, related to the theme of the unit, and asked the students to comment on the picture. The four steps of Kolbs' theory of experiential learning were taken into account when presenting the new pictures and

when analyzing the oral performance of the students. The students' replies and reflections were recorded by the researchers throughout the experiment so that the relevant data were obtained and later analyzed.

4. Results

The research is a qualitative analysis of the respondents' answers who took part in the experiment and later questioned during the interviews. The interviews were conducted online by using Google Meet, recorded and later analyzed by the researchers. To avoid redundancy, the repeated replies were deleted. The ten items of the interview with the students' replies are summarized below. The ten statements which the students evaluated by yes/no and then added their comments are marked by their consecutive numbers 1 to 10. However, as mentioned earlier, the questions were not asked in this order but they were chosen randomly so as not to create clusters with similar questions. The students were asked one after another randomly chosen questions and their answers were recorded along with their comments to be later analyzed. For convenience, their answers are cluster in the proper sequence, starting from the three questions (1-3) focusing on the variable of risk-taking, then three questions (4-6) about their motivation and finally three questions (7-9) connected to their anxiety that could arise when using the visually based L2 acquisition. The very last question (10) focused on their general summary of their experience. Since it is a qualitative survey, the research focused on the participants' subjective experience, satisfaction and feelings. Some of the respondents' replies are used here in the manuscript to illustrate the results and they appear in italics.

The students' replies to the first three questions which focused on the variable of risk-taking are as follows. The summary is presented in Table 1. With the first question (Do you try to say complicated sentences in class when you have the chance?), 33 students expressed their agreement and their justification was mostly expressed by these reactions and the main of them are *I like guessing what the pictures mean, so I speak fluently, The atmosphere of the class encourages me, The discussion is interesting, or I like speaking orally with my friends*. Only seven

students responded negatively to this statement expressing their reservations by *It is difficult to speak orally in class, I feel shy when speaking orally, or I prefer listening more than speaking*. This clearly shows that the respondents were quite satisfied with the task and they felt that it was a challenge for them to express themselves.

The second question (Do you try to incorporate previously learned words and structural patterns in new situations in class, even when the focus of the activity is on more recently learned items?) generated also a very high number of positive replies accounting for 29 positive responses. Their major reasons were expressed by them as follows: *It is a chance for me to test speaking orally, I like this technique too much. I can express myself, I think it is a natural process to use the old and new words, or Frankly, I forget arranging the words for speaking. I speak naturally*. Only eleven students said no to this item and their reasons were mostly *I can't arrange my words in time, The discussions were difficult, or I don't like speaking orally in front of my colleagues*. The majority of the respondents expressed their satisfaction with the opportunity to speak despite the fact that the course was conducted online and they appreciated the fact they could be more active than when using various exercises in the textbook.

For question 3 (Do you try to use linguistic elements which you find difficult in the lesson, even when you may be using them incorrectly?), again, the vast majority of the participants agreed (33 agreed) as they see it natural to take part in discussions. Their most frequent replies were: *I like participating in the discussion despite committing errors, It is a natural process to say something wrong, and We are foreign learners, so it is OK*. Ten replies were negative and the students expressed their worry to speak in a foreign language by saying that *I keep hesitant to say incorrect words, I don't like discussion in class, or It is difficult to say something wrong. I can't do that*. This is a very important aspect as the respondents attempted to intentionally use as many new words as possible even if they were not sure about their correctness. This is a crucial experience for them as it simulates real-life scenarios when they need to get by and they are not sure if they use the words correctly. This is a standard language issue and it motivates the students to be active and take part in the discussion or communication situation.

Table 1
Results of the Risk-Taking Questions

Question	Variable	Yes	Percentage	No	Percentage
1	Risk-taking	33	82.5%	7	17.5%
2	Risk-taking	29	72.5%	11	27.5%
3	Risk-taking	30	75%	10	25%
Average	Risk-taking	30.6	76.5%	9.3	23.25%

Question 4-6 focused on the motivation of the students. See the summary of them in Table 2. Specifically, question four (Did you feel interested in commenting on the pictures?) focused on the interest and excitement of the participants. Almost all of them (37 students) replied they liked the activity very much by expressing *I like this interesting way of teaching, It is just like a game, It depends on guessing, so I like it, or It breaks the monotony of traditional lectures*. Only three respondents expressed their dislike with the activity for these reasons: *I don't like speaking in front of the class, I usually felt shy, or I am interested in watching not in participating*. Again, it clearly shows that using visually based L2 acquisition is viewed even by the university students as motivation and it encouraged them to be more active. Moreover, it provided them with more variety and reduced monotony of traditional lectures/seminars.

The answers to question five (Did you feel confident to speak about the pictures?) were very balanced as 22 students expressed their confidence, while 18 students said no. Those who like the activity and were confident said that *The theme of the picture is easy so I felt confident to guess, or I know the meaning so it is usually easy*. The negative replies very frequent and they usually feel stressed and shy as it is clear from their reactions: *I don't feel confident in the speaking activities, I'm hesitant in most oral speaking activities, The feedback of the teacher scared me, or My pronunciation is not good*. It is very clear here that many of the participants were not very confident for many reasons. The most important is usually peer pressure and losing face when making mistakes. This is, naturally, very important

for late teenagers and young adults as they are creating their position in society and this peer reflection must be taken into account by them.

Question six (Did you feel that your learning experience was personalized?) was the last one connected to motivation. 34 students said yes to this question and there were only a few (6) negative answers. The justifications of the students were as follows: *I think this experience affects my style of learning; I'm waiting for this lecture eagerly as I feel it is a real achievement to me, or I used to prepare my words before this activity.* It clearly shows their increased motivation as no one replied no to this question. They appreciated the personalized learning style and their positive reactions support it.

Table 2
Results of the Motivation Questions

Question	Variable	Yes	Percentage	No	Percentage
4	Motivation	37	92.5%	3	7.5%
5	Motivation	22	55%	18	45%
6	Motivation	34	85%	6	15%
Average	Motivation	31	77.5%	9	22.5%

Another set of questions (7-9) focused on the student's anxiety connected to language learning. Table 3 presents the summary of the answers. Question seven (Do you feel quite sure of yourself when you are speaking in your foreign language class?) was answered very positively as thirty students said yes and the reasons they provided were: *I can say sentences orally, I am confident, and I don't care about others.* Ten students expressed their anxiety by: *I felt unsure in oral participation, I'm not sure of my friends' reactions, they may criticize me, or Oral presentation is a big problem.* Anxiety is very often connected to communication, mostly in public, and therefore it is no surprise that a quarter of the respondents expressed their increased tension and anxiety induced by speaking publicly.

Question eight (Do you feel worried about making mistakes in language class?) focuses on their subjective worries about making mistakes that could function as a deterrent. Thirty-one students said they are afraid and these are some sample answers why: *Yes, I, unfortunately, feel worried most of the time, It is not easy to commit mistakes in front of your class, or I think it is really difficult.* Whereas nine students said no for these reasons: *It is OK with me. I don't care, I used to speak orally in class, I like to participate orally because it is my way to learning, and I like to develop my speaking skills.* It is a very good achievement when the students are not obsessed with their mistakes, mostly when they have to talk, as it creates a natural environment of mutual trust and this improves the smooth progress of communication.

The last question that focused on the subjective anxiety was Do you keep thinking that the other students are better at languages than you? Twenty students said yes because *It is good to think of the levels of your colleagues as I think, It happens unintentionally, I don't know why, or I just want to cope with the discussion.* The same number of respondents said no. And their reasons were: *I am busy with myself, I don't think of others, and I am not used to doing that.* The most balanced question regarding their yes/no reactions can be caused by many aspects. It clearly shows that some of the students are highly motivated and ambitious, and thus, they want to compare their performance with the other ones. This competitive environment can be both positive and bring many advantages, but on the other hand, it can also present a certain threat and it should be dealt with appropriately by an experienced instructor.

Table 3
Results of the Anxiety Questions

Question	Variable	Yes	Percentage	No	Percentage
7	Anxiety	30	75%	10	25%
8	Anxiety	31	75.5%	9	22.5%
9	Anxiety	20	50%	20	50%
Average	Anxiety	27	67.5%	13	32.5%

The last question (10) focused on the students' general or specific attitudes related to the visually based L2 acquisition. The question asked was Do you like using pictures at the end of each lecture to comment orally on? Thirty-five students said yes and the main reasons were *It breaks the monotony of the lecture, It changes our mood, I like it even if I do not comment on it, It gives me a chance to speak and discuss in class, and I think it is very good.* Whereas only five students said no because they said that: *I don't like to comment, I think it is far from the theme of the lecture, and I like to listen not to speak.* Generally, the reactions are extremely positive as the vast majority of the participants were very happy and appreciated the novelty of the approach. They clearly expressed their satisfaction as the lessons contained an element of excitement, cooperation and communication, even if it was for just a short period of time.

Table 4
Results of the Attitude Question

Question	Variable	Yes	Percentage	No	Percentage
10	Attitude	35	87.5%	5	12.5%
Average	Attitude	35	87.5%	5	12.5%

5. Discussion

The results of the interviews show that the percentage of motivation (77.5 %) is higher than other items, but the anxiety score is also relatively high (67.5%) which indicates high peer pressure and low self-esteem of the participants. This means that using visually based L2 acquisition as a supplementary tool at the end of each online lecture, even at a relatively high level of language competence, affects students' motivation in a very positive way. Their risk-taking is also enhanced as they like using the language spontaneously and more intuitively. On the other hand, their anxiety levels are not dramatically increased by this activity and that means that even shy and more introverted students will be willing to take part in this communication activity and it brings certain benefits to them.

Students' motivation needs to be enhanced in online education and using visually based L2 acquisition in their language education seems to be the right tool as it improves their motivation as the results of the interviews show. So, the results of the present study are very encouraging regarding the used methodology as it shows notable improvement in the intrinsic and extrinsic motivation of the students. They own the desire to take part in the lecture/seminar by being actively engaged in the lectures with high enthusiasm. These results are in line with Keller & Suzuki (2004), Taran (2005), Rovai et al. (2007), and Harandi (2015) who confirm the same, but this study supports the idea that such a simple tool can also be used in a higher level of education and higher language competence students, i.e. the university language students, and it gives them pleasure and interest in their L2 acquisition classes.

Risk-taking is the second variable that gained (76.5%) in the interviews with the students. The use of visually based L2 acquisition for oral activities is naturally related to a large extent to students' risk-taking and it is the main reason for improving it in the sample of the study. As recommended by Al-Obaydi (2020b, p. 361) that "the context of the study plays a crucial role in developing students' risk-taking." Usually, the active speakers of the L2 are risk-takers, by their nature, as the oral presentation in a target language is not an easy matter for L2 students. The continuous trials of students to comment on pictures despite their mistakes proved

that they are successful language speakers. Therefore, this activity improves their risk-taking in a natural way, the result that is supported by what is stated by Al-Obaydi (2020b, p. 353) that risk-taking “is not a fixed personality trait. It can be learned and developed through developing students’ abilities of problem-solving and willingness to accept failure”. Moreover, risk-taking enhancement usually occurs as a result of applying the strong version of communicative language teaching, as the situation of the present study shows, where the students are actively engaged in speaking and communicating with their peers and teachers. This enhancement of students’ risk-taking accelerates the process of learning “using English to learn it” (Freeman & Anderson, 2011, p. 131). This result comes in line with Muñoz and Hidalgo (2013) who mentioned that visual aids are practical beneficial instruments for encouraging speaking skills in oral communication, reinforcing oral tasks and interaction among students learning English as a second language.

In relation to classroom anxiety, the percentage of students’ replies in the interview was 67.5% of those who said yes to the questions. This result reflects the degree of anxiety in online education generally, as this activity is part of it, and how it may affect students’ behaviour unless finding an urgent solution to it. Online education represents a source of stress and anxiety to the students as many of them may suffer from technophobia where the feelings of confusion and anxiety are prevailing (Russell, 2020; Bakhtiar et al., 2018). On the other hand, oral performance is another matter that has a direct effect on students’ anxiety. Students’ performance in L2 classes is usually related to anxiety in one way or another. So, teachers are obliged to find solutions to decrease the percentage of classroom anxiety of students based on what is stated by Krashen (1982, p. 31) that “low anxiety appears to be conducive to second language acquisition, whether measured as personal or classroom anxiety”. So, the results of this part of the study seem justifiable as they are related to the two mentioned reasons.

The last question of the interview demonstrates the attitudes of the sample of the study towards visually based L2 acquisition in online classes. Thirty-five students out of forty said yes to this question with a percentage of 87.5%, see Table 3. This result clarifies the positive attitudes of the students towards visually based L2

acquisition. The use of interactive activities in online education seems essential as the students really need things that break the monotony and that turn them to be active participants in the lectures not just passive receivers of information.

Another result gained from the daily observation of the researchers was the notable increase in the feeling of self-actualization and cooperation in class. Their enthusiasm and cognitive engagement were also increased beside the entertainment that attained by using visual images in lectures/seminars. In addition, the mood of the students was changed completely.

The present study shows a piece of clear evidence that using visual aids in online classes, such as pictures, can positively affect students risk-taking and motivation. Though the feelings of class anxiety are still quite high, the students show decreased levels of fear when using the pictures while they have to describe them. The use of pictures, to comment orally on, in L2 online education is an important technique but it is not enough to cover all the obstacles that face both teachers and students in online teaching. All cultural and emotional intelligence factors should be taken into consideration when dealing with teaching EFL students digitally (Al-Obaydi, Pikhart, & Derakhshan, 2022). This calls for more research with more comprehensive techniques and in different contexts, wider perspectives, in a larger geographical area, and with other platforms as well. The present study can be considered as a pilot study as the research sample was not very large, but despite this limitation, it can still provide reliable and relevant data to be further verified by much larger research.

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