Dialog on Language Instruction

Action Research

Beyond the "Vocabulary Cult": A Six-Step Approach to L2 Listening

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This paper explores the challenges of listening comprehension for Persian language learners at the Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center (DLIFLC), where an overemphasis on the role of vocabulary can overshadow the development of other crucial skills, particularly listening. I call this a "vocabulary cult." Drawing on research highlighting the importance of syntactic knowledge and real-time processing for successful listening, this paper details a six-step pedagogical approach implemented at the Persian Farsi School (UPF), with students drawn from multiple departments, to address these challenges. The intervention focuses on progressively developing learners' ability to parse spoken language, starting with identifying subject-verb units in short sentences and advancing to comprehending complex and compound sentences containing embedded modal verbs, prepositional phrases, and low-frequency vocabulary. The approach incorporates strategies such as chunking, syntactic mapping, identifying dependent and independent clauses as well as verb mood. Defense Language Proficiency Test (DLPT) results indicate that explicit instruction in sentence structure and real-time processing strategies can contribute to student improvement in listening comprehension, even for students who initially struggled with severe listening difficulties. These findings demonstrate the efficacy of a structured, progressive approach to second language (L2) listening instruction. Although this paper will focus on examples from Persian Farsi, many of these techniques can be applied to other languages as well, shifting content to the specific needs of the language being taught.

Keywords: *Listening Comprehension, Listening Strategy, Syntactic Parsing, Syntactic Mapping, Real-time Processing*

BACKGROUND

Within the rigorous language training environment of DLIFLC, achieving proficiency in listening comprehension is paramount yet challenging. As Vandergrift (2004) aptly points out, "Listening is probably the least explicit of the four language skills, making it the most difficult skill to learn" (p. 4), not only because of the physiological and cognitive processes involved, but also the attention learners have to pay to "contextual and 'socially coded acoustic clues'" (Swaffar & Bacon, 1993, as cited in Vandergrift, 2004, p. 4). The multifaceted nature of listening requires learners to process auditory input while integrating it with their linguistic and cultural knowledge. Acquiring listening skills in a non-native environment, such as the DLIFLC where exposure is primarily classroom-based, presents a considerable obstacle due to limited authentic, real-world input.

Furthermore, the listening process itself is inherently complex, involving factors such as rapid speech, accent variations, reduced forms, unfamiliar vocabulary and idioms, and complex syntax. Learners must simultaneously employ bottom-up and top-down processing, which can be difficult with limited prior knowledge. Beyond these general challenges, each language presents unique obstacles. This paper focuses on Persian, which has a predominantly Subject-Object-Verb (SOV) word order, unlike the Subject-Verb-Object (SVO) structure of English, thereby requiring learners to process information differently, often delaying full comprehension until the verb appears at the sentence's end. This verb-final structure increases cognitive load as listeners must hold information in their working memory.

Informal observations at the DLIFLC Persian Farsi School indicate that even students proficient in reading may struggle to identify verbs in longer sentences (around 30 words) and maintain focus, suggesting that unfamiliar, non-essential words can disrupt processing. Furthermore, learners often rely on isolated keywords in order to create meaning, leading to inaccurate interpretations based on lexical-semantic information rather than syntactic structure (Clahsen & Felser, 2006).

The strong emphasis on vocabulary acquisition at UPF—evidenced by the substantial amount of instructional time devoted to vocabulary review, the prevalence of vocabulary review clinics, and students' over-reliance on decontextualized vocabulary practice apps and tools—what I personally refer to as a "vocabulary cult," may inadvertently overshadow the development of crucial listening skills. Some research (Stæhr, 2008) suggests that vocabulary size has a weaker correlation with listening comprehension compared to reading and writing. In addition to students having sufficient vocabulary, other information such as syntactic knowledge, the ability to chunk discourse (Richards, 1983; Vafaee & Suzuki, 2020), and efficient real-time processing (Rost, 2011) are vital in listening. A strong foundation in morphology, understanding word formation and function (Hasan & Nomnian, 2021), further supports listening comprehension.

To address these multifaceted challenges hindering students' listening comprehension, I designed and implemented a structured, step-by-step intervention to explore options to assist students in developing this skill. This plan involved a progression from identifying core sentence

elements (subject and verb) in simple sentences to tackling more complex structures. Subsequent steps included introducing prepositional phrases at the sentence's beginning; the identification of subject, direct object, and verb; the ability to filter out non-essential unfamiliar vocabulary; the analysis of sentences containing dependent and independent clauses; and finally, the comprehension of compound sentences with coordinated clauses and various modifiers. Throughout this process, explicit instruction on Persian grammatical features such as compound verbs and the genitive construction—alongside strategies such as chunking, anticipating sentence structure, and focusing on verb tense and prepositions—were integrated as potential avenues for enhancing students' ability to accurately process and interpret spoken Persian. This paper aims to investigate the effectiveness of this multi-stage intervention in mitigating the identified listening comprehension difficulties for Basic course students, who need to achieve an Interagency Language Roundtable (ILR) Level 2 in listening in order to graduate.

This paper addresses the following question:

> RQ: To what degree do targeted interventions that develop specific listening sub-skills and address Persian's unique features seem to help mitigate these challenges?

ACTION PLAN

This action research project was conducted to address the persistent challenges in listening comprehension faced by Persian language learners at DLIFLC. The primary focus was on improving students' ability to process sentence structure in real-time, identify essential grammatical elements, and move beyond reliance on isolated keywords. The intervention involved a structured, step-by-step approach using materials developed by the researcher, ensuring no prior student exposure.

Context

The participants in this action research project were 30 UPF students encountered across various class sections within the Persian Farsi School over a period of three years. These students progressed through the foundational stages of the curriculum and demonstrated good reading proficiency. However, ongoing observation and analysis of their performance on unit and proficiency tests revealed a consistent struggle with listening comprehension, particularly when dealing with sentences exhibiting non-standard word order and increased grammatical complexity. This difficulty impacted their ability to extract key information and achieve higher levels of listening proficiency required for their professional goals. The standard curriculum provided a base in grammar and vocabulary, but this project aimed to supplement it with explicit strategies and focused practice to enhance real-time processing of spoken Persian.

Actions Taken

To address the identified listening comprehension challenges, a six-step intervention was designed and implemented (see Table 1). Each step focused on a specific aspect of sentence

processing, building progressively in complexity. The intervention was conducted exclusively in one-on-one instructional sessions between the researcher and individual students. The materials used for the listening exercises in each step were developed by the researcher and were authentic or semi-authentic in nature, ensuring that students had not encountered them previously. The core methodology involved playing audio recordings of Persian sentences and asking students to report their understanding, with a consistent emphasis on identifying the essential grammatical elements: verb, subject, and object. When students encountered difficulties, the researcher provided guidance through targeted prompts rather than direct answers, such as indicating the potential location of the subject (beginning or elsewhere), directing attention to prepositions, or reminding them of the object marker. Guidance also included pointing out relevant morphology, verb tense, and mood to aid comprehension as needed. A key feature of this work was the deliberate use of high-frequency words for subjects, objects, and verbs in the exercises, recognizing that the intervention's effectiveness would be limited if students did not understand the basic vocabulary.

Step One: Identifying the Subject and Verb in Short Sentences

This step focused on identifying the subject and verb in short sentences (up to 15 words). In this initial step, the subject was always placed at the beginning of the sentence, and the verb was consistently at the end. Students listened to the audios played without pause, and the primary prompt was to identify these two core elements. If a student struggled, I provided guidance. This included reminding them of the typical SOV order in Persian and that in these introductory sentences, the subject would be at the beginning and the verb at the end. I played the audio as many times as necessary until the student could pick out the correct elements, stopping only if signs of frustration appeared.

A small percentage of students exhibited delayed auditory processing, appearing to tune in to the sentence mid-way. These students often missed the initial portion of the sentence, including the subject, and therefore struggled to grasp the overall meaning. To address this challenge, students were encouraged to proactively anticipate the sentence structure before listening. They were prompted to ask themselves questions such as: *How would the sentence likely begin? Does it start with a name, an adverb of time (e.g., tomorrow, yesterday), a preposition (e.g., in, at), or another grammatical element?* This pre-listening strategy proved to be beneficial in improving students' ability to identify and process subject units within spoken sentences.

This initial step was generally completed within one 50-minute session, allowing students to build a foundational understanding of subject-verb identification in simpler sentences. However, some students exhibited occasional lapses in subsequent sessions, necessitating a brief review of these foundational strategies before proceeding with more advanced listening exercises.

Step Two: Identifying the Subject and Verb with Sentence-Initial Phrases

After successful completion of step one, I progressed to sentences where the subject was not in the initial position, often beginning with a prepositional phrase (still under 15 words). The focus

remained on identifying the subject and verb. This seemingly small shift in sentence structure required students to execute a more sophisticated grammatical maneuver. They needed to employ a chunking strategy to effectively parse the sentence. For successful chunking, the students were instructed to "follow the Ezafeh." The *Ezafeh* is an "e" sound that, like the genitive case, serves to express a relationship between two or more words (nouns, adjectives, or even in some cases, prepositions). It is a very helpful tool for breaking down a sentence into chunks and identifying the essential elements since it usually marks the beginning and the end of a sentence element. It can also be a challenging element to recognize in spoken Persian due to the shortness of the sound, particularly for students who are struggling to notice the subject and verb.

Recognizing that some students faced significant listening comprehension challenges, a differentiated approach was implemented. For these students, explicit guidance was provided, detailing the precise location and composition of each sentence element, known as syntactic mapping. This step typically took one 50-minute session to implement, although the need for more individual guidance and syntactic mapping extended the time for some learners.

Step Three: Identifying the Subject, Direct Object, and Verb in Single Sentences

Step three focused on identifying the subject, direct object, and verb in single sentences. Students were explicitly asked to identify these three elements after listening. This task proved considerably more demanding, with some students reporting mental fatigue after only a few minutes. It required sustained attention throughout the entire sentence, necessitating the ability to filter out unfamiliar or unprocessed words while simultaneously pinpointing the three essential elements. To manage the difficulty, sentence length was dynamically adjusted based on individual student performance. Guidance included reminding them of the function and placement of the direct object marker "raa." Students who attempted real-time translation were encouraged to instead try visualizing the content of what they heard, turning the sentences into mental pictures, like a movie or animation, a technique that can accelerate processing and improve retention. This step also benefited students, as it illustrated to them the importance of sustained attention in listening and that this attention and memory development is a skill that can be practiced and improved. This step usually required one to two 50-minute sessions to allow for sufficient practice and address mental fatigue.

Step Four: Filtering out Non-Essential Words and Focusing on Key Grammatical Elements

In this step, students were exposed to sentences that included high-frequency subjects, objects, and verbs but with additional low-frequency, unfamiliar vocabulary as distractors. The goal was to train students to filter out non-essential words and focus on the core grammatical structure and meaning. Students were prompted to identify the subject, verb, and object, and guidance involved reassuring them that understanding every word, particularly the unessential words, was not necessary to grasp the core message. However, it became apparent that many students required considerable guidance at this stage. To support them, I sometimes had to provide a "map" of the sentence, explicitly stating the expected order of each grammatical element or indicating the number of words each element consisted of; for example, I would explain that the

sentence begins with the subject, followed by an adverb of time, then the object, an additional adverbial element, a place, and finally the verb. The duration of this step, focused on filtering unfamiliar vocabulary, varied among students, with some grasping the strategy within a single 50-minute session while others required additional practice over several sessions.

Step Five: Identifying Key Elements in Sentences with Independent and Dependent Clauses

In this step, I introduced sentences containing both dependent and independent clauses, with some instances including modal verbs. Students were tasked with identifying the essential elements in both sentences. Guidance involved directing their attention to conjunctions that link clauses and explaining how modal verbs indicate possibility or necessity. Students were encouraged to pay attention to how verbs in initial independent clauses, such as reporting verbs like *told* or *announced*, often signal the introduction of key information or the main message in a following dependent clause. This understanding was intended to help them prioritize their focus when processing longer sentences. The complexity of analyzing sentences with dependent and independent clauses meant that the time required for this step varied, typically ranging from one to several 50-minute sessions depending on individual student processing abilities.

Step Six: Identifying Key Elements and Relationship between Them in Longer Sentences

In this step, I exposed students to compound sentences, which consisted of two or more independent clauses joined by conjunctions, and also included modal verbs, adverbs of time, and adverbs of place. Students were first asked to identify the main elements in each clause and the relationship between them, and later, after they successfully completed that, they were asked to find temporal or spatial adverbs. Guidance focused on sentence mapping, chunking, and analyzing the function of conjunctions and the information provided by adverbs. The final step, addressing compound sentences, demonstrated the most significant individual variation in duration, with some students achieving proficiency within approximately five 50-minute sessions, while others required up to ten sessions to solidify their understanding and processing skills.

These steps are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1

Summary of the Six-Step Listening Strategy

Step	Focus / Goal	Key Strategies / Guidance	Challenges & Differentiation	Duration
Step One	Identify subject and verb in short sentences (≤15 words) with SOV order	Play audio multiple times; remind students of SOV order; prompt pre-listening anticipation questions	Some students exhibit delayed auditory processing; occasional lapses in later sessions	1 × 50-min session
Step Two	Identify subject and verb in sentences (≤15 words) starting with prepositional phrases	Chunking strategy using *Ezafeh*; syntactic mapping for students needing extra guidance	More complex sentence structure; students needing detailed guidance for comprehension	1 × 50-min session (longer for some)
Step Three	Identify subject, direct object, and verb in single sentences (length may be adjusted based on student performance)	Remind placement of direct object marker *raa*; visualize sentence as mental picture instead of translating	High cognitive load; mental fatigue; sentence length adjusted individually	1–2 × 50-min sessions
Step Four	Filter out low-frequency/ unfamiliar vocabulary to focus on core grammatical elements (length varies per student)	Reassure students not every word needs to be understood; provide sentence "maps" showing expected element order or word counts	Significant guidance often needed; individual pace varies	1–several × 50-min sessions
Step Five	Identify elements in sentences with dependent and independent clauses, including modal verbs (variable length depending on clauses)	Highlight conjunctions linking clauses; teach function of modal verbs; focus on main message cues from initial verbs	Complexity varies widely; some students require multiple sessions	1–several × 50-min sessions
Step Six	Identify elements in compound sentences with multiple clauses, modal verbs, and adverbs (variable length depending on number of clauses and added adverbs)	Sentence mapping, chunking, analyzing conjunctions; identify temporal and spatial adverbs after mastering core elements	Greatest individual variation in duration	5–10 × 50-min sessions

DATA COLLECTED

The effectiveness of this action research project was evaluated through several data collection methods:

1. Immediate Comprehension Reports: After each audio segment, students reported their understanding by explaining in their own words, with a particular focus on whether they could identify the verb, subject, and object. The researcher noted the accuracy of their reports and the specific elements they struggled with, providing immediate formative feedback and guiding questions.

2. Student Feedback: Following each hourly session, students provided verbal feedback on the difficulty of the exercises, the usefulness of the guidance, and their perceived progress in comprehension. This immediate feedback loop allowed for timely adjustments to the pace and focus of the intervention.

At the end of the sessions, students also gave online feedback. Ten students participated: six reported that the strategies taught were "very helpful," while four described them as "somewhat helpful." Overall, the responses indicate that although all strategies were perceived as valuable, the most immediate and widely appreciated benefits came from core syntactic recognition (identifying subject, object, and verb) and grammatical marker identification, which provided a strong framework for real-time sentence processing. In contrast, syntactic mapping was the least favored strategy among students. However, it could be that students had internalized syntactic mapping to such a degree that they were no longer aware of using this strategy. Regardless, it is clear to me as the researcher that this skill played a critical role in building competence, even if students no longer consciously recognized its importance once the skill had become more automatic. Here is the breakdown of students' responses:

- **Finding the subject, object, and verb** – All 10 students highlighted this as the most helpful strategy. Focusing on the subject, object, and verb reduces cognitive load by allowing the learner to concentrate on the essential elements of a sentence while ignoring less important details. This approach is a minimalistic, bottom-up strategy for listening—efficiently targeting only the core components and avoiding unnecessary details—which streamlines comprehension and makes it much easier to grasp the main meaning.

- **Identifying prepositions and object markers** – Selected by 8 students. Prepositions and object markers act as signposts in a sentence, helping learners locate its elements. This makes it easier to map the overall sentence structure and avoid misinterpreting the roles of words. Many students with weaker listening skills reported getting stuck on unfamiliar words. Encouraging them to focus on prepositions or object markers allowed them to move forward and follow the speech to the end.

- **Filtering out unfamiliar words** – Noted by 6 students. This skill is particularly challenging for language learners, especially analytic learners. To support them, I exposed students to sentences in which low-frequency (unfamiliar) words were attached to familiar words in the genitive case, and encouraged them to focus on the familiar words while ignoring the unfamiliar ones. By doing so, they were able to keep up with the flow of speech and reconstruct meaning from context. This strategy was also reinforced by the first two strategies: (1) focusing on the subject, object, and verb, and (2) trying to identify prepositions and object markers.

- **Chunking and hearing the *Ezafeh*** – Chosen by 4 students. Chunking helps learners group words into meaningful units and map the sentence structure. Recognizing the *Ezafeh* facilitates chunking in Farsi. This strategy also allows students to avoid getting stuck on a single word. However, it requires substantial practice and mental stamina, placing considerable pressure on the brain, making it a skill that warrants consistent practice inside the classroom and for homework practice.

- **Anticipating sentence structure** – Mentioned by 3 students. This predictive listening strategy enabled learners to guess what would come next in a sentence, giving them an advantage in real-time comprehension. It was observed that many students missed the very first milliseconds of each sentence or passage. To address this, they were encouraged to mentally ask themselves while listening: *How would this sentence start? Would it start with a preposition, a subject, a time expression, a place, or something else?* Prepositions and object markers were particularly helpful cues, as they signaled which element would follow—or, in the case of object markers, which element preceded. This approach was especially effective with familiar structures, such as news reports, but was harder to apply in unpredictable contexts.

- **Syntactic mapping (knowing where to find specific elements in the sentence)** – Selected by only 1 student. This low number is likely because syntactic mapping was used primarily in the early stages of the sessions, when the instructor was responsible for pointing out the position of each sentence element. As students progressed, they became capable of doing this mapping themselves without external guidance. By the time they reached later stages, they no longer needed explicit instruction in this skill, and therefore did not recall it as a distinct strategy they relied on, even though it had been foundational in their earlier success.

3. Unit Tests, Proficiency Tests, and DLPT Results: The primary measure of the intervention's success was the comparison of students' performance on unit tests, proficiency tests, and the DLPT. The researcher tracked individual student scores and overall class performance to identify any significant improvements in listening comprehension following the implementation of the structured, step-by-step activities.

The combination of real-time comprehension checks, immediate student feedback, and the analysis of formal assessment scores provided a comprehensive picture of the impact of this

action research project on the listening comprehension skills of the Persian language learners. The data collected aimed to determine if the focused attention on grammatical elements and the progressive increase in sentence complexity led to measurable improvements in their ability to understand spoken Persian. It is also important to note the usefulness of allowing students to practice different strategies as they improve their listening, as different students will respond best to different strategies.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

As Vandergrift (2004) asserts, listening is often considered the most challenging language skill due to its multifaceted nature. This is particularly true for learners of Farsi at DLIFLC, where the SOV word order, coupled with the fact that students are learning in a non-native environment without consistent exposure to authentic spoken Farsi outside the classroom, and the demands of intensive training create significant cognitive load. To address these challenges, this action research implemented a six-step intervention focused on progressively developing students' ability to process Persian sentence structure. This involved a gradual progression from identifying core sentence elements in simple sentences to comprehending complex and compound sentences through explicit instruction and targeted listening exercises.

The implementation of this six-step intervention yielded notable improvements in students' ability to accurately parse sentences, progressing from identifying verbs to comprehending complex and compound structures. Encouragingly, students' performance on subsequent unit tests showed marked improvement, and all students with good reading skills (rated B- or above) successfully passed the listening portion of the DLPT after engaging with the intervention. A systematic, step-by-step approach, starting with basic sentence structures and gradually increasing complexity, offers a way to build a strong foundation and mitigate this overload. Explicit instruction on verb identification and processing is crucial given the verb's pivotal role in Persian sentence comprehension.

The findings of this study are consistent with previous research on the importance of syntactic knowledge and real-time processing in listening comprehension. For example, Richards (1983) and Vafaee and Suzuki (2020) both emphasize the role of syntactic knowledge in facilitating comprehension. This enhanced ability to focus aligns with Rost's (2011) assertion that effective listening requires the ability to group speech into manageable constituents that can be processed within short-term memory.

However, it is important to acknowledge a nuanced finding: five of the 30 students continued to struggle with listening comprehension despite the intervention. These students exhibited considerable vocabulary deficiencies, which hindered their ability to process and understand spoken sentences. This suggests that while syntactic knowledge and real-time processing strategies are crucial, a certain level of vocabulary proficiency is also necessary for successful listening comprehension. This finding is consistent with the work of Clahsen and Felser (2006), who found that second language learners often prioritize lexical-semantic and pragmatic

information over syntactic information when processing sentences. This implies that future interventions might benefit from an earlier focus on addressing vocabulary issues, or potentially building a stronger foundation in reading skills, before or in conjunction with targeted syntactic parsing instruction.

The findings of this study hold considerable implications for the Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center, where the demanding and fast-paced nature of language courses presents unique hurdles for L2 listening comprehension development. Learning in a non-native environment, coupled with the inherent complexities of languages like Farsi – a verb-final language demanding non-linear processing – can severely impede the acquisition of effective listening skills. These pronounced challenges contribute to student attrition, making the identification and implementation of effective solutions and strategies critically important for supporting more students in successfully completing their language training and ultimately reaching the DLIFLC's graduation requirement of ILR Level 2 on the listening component of the DLPT. Currently, some schools within DLIFLC, including the Persian Farsi School, are facing challenges in supporting students to achieve that score. Applying the step-by-step syntactic parsing strategy demonstrated in this action research could provide a valuable tool to improve listening comprehension and thereby help these programs achieve the institute's proficiency goals. Instead of an overemphasis on vocabulary acquisition, language learning at DLIFLC, and particularly in programs like the Persian Farsi School, must be supplemented with explicit instruction in syntactic parsing and the identification of essential sentence elements to foster robust listening comprehension skills.

To enhance the learning environment, instructors can be trained to recognize the critical importance of syntactic knowledge in listening comprehension and how to explicitly teach parsing strategies to students. This training should equip instructors to guide students in identifying essential sentence elements, understanding grammatical relationships, and applying techniques like chunking and anticipating sentence structure. Furthermore, instructors can learn how to train students to filter out non-essential vocabulary and focus on the core grammatical framework of the target language to improve comprehension. The variability in student progress highlights the need for individualized instruction and targeted interventions that adapt the pace and complexity of listening tasks to meet individual learning needs, potentially revisiting earlier steps or providing additional scaffolding as required.

The success of the six-step approach at DLIFLC has several implications for future practice. At the UPF level, the next steps include systematically recording one-on-one instructional sessions for the purpose of demonstrating the approach to other instructors and developing targeted training workshops to support faculty adoption of these listening-focused strategies. Other language programs can adopt a similar structured, progressive approach to listening comprehension, incorporating syntactic mapping, chunking, and real-time processing strategies while focusing on the elements that pose the greatest challenges in that language. Additionally, the findings suggest that a balanced approach that integrates vocabulary acquisition with syntactic knowledge and listening strategies is essential for successful language learning.

CONCLUSION

This study has detailed a six-step pedagogical approach designed to address the multifaceted challenges of listening comprehension for Persian language learners at the Defense Language Institute. By systematically targeting specific linguistic features, from the identification of subject-verb units to the processing of complex and compound sentences, this intervention aimed to equip learners with the necessary tools for effective real-time language processing. The findings underscore the crucial role of explicit instruction in syntactic knowledge and the development of targeted listening strategies. As demonstrated by the progress of even those students who initially struggled with severe listening difficulties, a structured, progressive approach, coupled with individualized support, can significantly enhance listening comprehension skills. While vocabulary acquisition remains essential, this action research highlights the importance of moving beyond a "vocabulary cult" to address the underlying cognitive processes involved in listening. By focusing on sentence-level processing, including the identification of verbs, the parsing of clauses, and the understanding of modal verbs and sentence structure, learners can develop a more robust foundation for comprehending spoken language. The results presented here offer valuable insights for educators seeking to improve listening instruction for Persian and potentially other languages. The success of this approach suggests that targeted interventions focusing on specific grammatical features and processing strategies can empower learners to overcome listening challenges and achieve greater proficiency in the target language. However, this action research project involved only 30 students, which limits the generalizability of the findings, and further research with larger samples is necessary to confirm and expand upon these results.

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