



| Research Article / Araştırma Makalesi |

A Process-Oriented Approach to English Curriculum Design: A Case Study

İngilizce Öğretim Müfredatının Kolektif Bir Öğrenme Süreci Haline Getirilmesi: Bir Vaka Çalışması

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Keywords

1. Process-oriented curriculum
2. Teacher agency
3. Collaborative syllabus design
4. English curriculum unit

Anahtar Kelimeler

1. Süreç Odaklı Müfredat
2. Öğretmen Etkinliği
3. İş birlikli müfredat tasarımı
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Abstract

Purpose: The purpose of this study is to explore the role of instructors in English curriculum design and to further investigate whether a top-down curriculum assigned by the curriculum unit or one developed collaboratively with instructors would yield better results.

Design/Methodology/Approach: In this case study, a qualitative research design was conducted to determine instructors' attitudes toward a process-oriented curriculum during the spring semester of 2023-2024. Data was gathered through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions and analyzed using thematic analysis procedures. The research was carried out in one of the private universities in Türkiye and included eight instructors (two male and six female) with more than ten years of experience in English language teaching at different levels.

Findings: The study revealed that both a curriculum prepared by a unit with trained staff and a curriculum including all the teaching staff have ups and downs. In addition, participants reported increased process awareness when included in curriculum design yet highlighted organizational challenges. If carefully organized and scaffolded, a process-oriented curriculum with the collaboration of both instructors and curriculum unit would generate better outcomes.

Highlights: Curriculum, content, and instructional planning are among the most influential predictors of success in language classes. The individuals involved—whether classroom instructors or curriculum designers—play a critical role in determining that success. When instructors have a voice in curriculum development, they gain a deeper understanding of its content and the rationale behind each step. Conversely, a strictly top-down approach, where each step is prescribed by the curriculum unit, may compromise quality and limit flexibility. Therefore, exploring the most effective practices is necessary and valuable.

Öz

Çalışmanın amacı: Bu çalışmanın amacı, İngilizce müfredat tasarımında öğretim elemanlarının rolünü incelemek ve müfredat birimi tarafından yukarıdan aşağıya atanan bir müfredat ile öğretim elemanlarıyla iş birliği içinde geliştirilen bir müfredatın hangisinin daha iyi sonuçlar vereceğini araştırmaktır. Müfredat, içerik ve öğretim planı, dil sınıflarındaki başarının en etkili belirleyicileri arasındadır. İster sınıfta görev yapan öğretim elemanları ister müfredatı hazırlayan kişiler olsun, bu sürecin aktörleri, başarının belirlenmesinde önemli bir rol oynar. Müfredat hakkında söz sahibi olan öğretim elemanları, içeriğe dair daha derin bir anlayış kazanır ve her adımın arkasındaki gerekçelerin farkına varırlar. Ancak müfredat birimi tarafından yukarıdan aşağıya bir süreçle her adımın önceden belirlenmesi, kaliteyi tehlikeye atabilir ve esnekliği engelleyebilir. Bu nedenle en verimli uygulamaları araştırmak oldukça değerlidir.

Materyal ve Yöntem: Bu vaka çalışmasında, nitel bir araştırma deseni benimsenmiş ve 2023-2024 bahar döneminde süreç odaklı müfredata yönelik öğretim elemanlarının tutumlarını belirlemek amaçlanmıştır. Veriler yarı yapılandırılmış mülakatlar ve odak grup görüşmeleri yoluyla toplanmış, tematik içerik analizi yöntemleriyle analiz edilmiştir. Araştırma, Türkiye'deki bir vakıf üniversitesinde gerçekleştirilmiş ve farklı düzeylerde on yılı aşkın İngilizce öğretim deneyimine sahip sekiz öğretim elemanı (iki erkek, altı kadın) ile yürütülmüştür.

Bulgular: Bu çalışma, hem eğitimli personelden oluşan bir birim tarafından hazırlanan bir müfredatın hem de tüm öğretim kadrosunun dahil olduğu bir müfredatın artı ve eksilerinin olduğunu ortaya koymuştur. Ayrıca katılımcılar, müfredat hazırlama sürecine dahil olduklarında, sürece dair farkındalıklarının arttığını ancak örgütsel zorlukların da bulunduğunu belirtmişlerdir. Yine de süreç odaklı bir müfredat, her iki tarafın iş birliğiyle dikkatli bir şekilde organize edilir ve gerekli destekleme sağlanırsa, daha iyi sonuçların doğurabileceği sonucuna varılmıştır.

Önemli vurgular: Müfredat, içerik ve öğretim planlaması, dil sınıflarındaki başarının en güçlü belirleyicileri arasındadır. Bu süreçte dahil olan kişiler —ister sınıf içindeki öğretim elemanları ister müfredat tasarımcıları olsun— başarının şekillenmesinde kritik bir rol oynar. Öğretim elemanları müfredat geliştirme sürecinde söz sahibi olduklarında, içeriği daha iyi kavrarlar ve her adımın arkasındaki gerekçeleri anlayabilirler. Öte yandan, müfredat birimi tarafından adım adım yukarıdan aşağıya belirlenen bir yaklaşım, kaliteyi tehlikeye atabilir ve esnekliği sınırlandırabilir. Bu nedenle en etkili ve verimli uygulamaları araştırmak hem gerekli hem de değerlidir.

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INTRODUCTION

Being the language of science, business, and technology, teaching and learning English have gained more importance and, as a result, have gone through abundant adjustments for the last decades. Because of its significance, there has been immense research on delivering English content best so that learners get the most out of it. One of the most important determiners of success in teaching English is executing the curriculum and the syllabus. Even though most scholars use curriculum and syllabus interchangeably, some distinguish between the two concepts.

To start with, Krahne (1987) termed curriculum as a general map containing more than one syllabus, which is more specific and concrete than the curriculum. In his view, the curriculum defines the goals that the learners achieve at the end of the instruction, while the syllabus establishes the lesson's content. Graves (2016) further expresses the curriculum as the course plan that describes how the content is turned into outlines for teaching and learning to reach the target goals and objectives. According to Richards (2013), a curriculum is a proposal for acquiring information. He classified the curriculum as backward, forward, and central. In the backward design, the specifications are decided at the beginning, and instructional processes are developed accordingly. In other words, goals and standards are predetermined, and content is arranged to realize them. Tyler (1949) and Taba (1962), two influential scholars in curriculum and instruction, put forward a different approach to curriculum. This approach, which is regarded as a product approach, lost popularity as the process approach became popular, yet its influence is still evident in most curriculum and syllabus designs conducted today. That said, the purpose of the curriculum is to clarify what and how students will learn while the syllabus, dependent on the curriculum, is how the contents are designed into docile and learnable units with the arrangement of the sequences.

Ylimaki (2013) brought a different perspective by categorizing the curriculum as the intended, the enacted, the assessed, the learned, and the hidden curriculum. As this section cannot explain all these types in detail, it will be good to briefly state that most educators today agree on the dynamic interplay between curriculum and its phases, which inevitably impacts the syllabus. In other words, "the processes of planning, enacting, and evaluating are interrelated and dynamic, and should not be linear. They move back and forth to inform and influence each other" (Graves, 2008, p. 152).

Though the name attributed to the curriculum changed by overemphasizing one phase over another or by changing the sequences of the phases and adding another phase according to the time needed, the overall goal to deliver the content to serve a particular purpose remained the same. Whereas the language stands as a means of conducting that purpose, the discussion of who should decide on the curriculum content and the syllabus has still been an argumentation issue.

Until recently, stakeholders such as publishers, school administrations, or curriculum units prescribed the language curriculum and syllabus, hence, the role of teachers in decision-making was restricted. Therefore, to the best of our knowledge, the literature on teachers as curriculum and syllabus design agents has been limited. This case study is conducted to add literature by closing this gap and to illuminate the readers curious about curriculum design practices by unfolding the changes that came up throughout a process where teachers planned the English curriculum at different levels in teams, stated their concerns, and suggestion. Finally, implications for prospective researchers are provided.

Literature review

This section clarifies the readers by explaining significant factors affecting curriculum design in English language teaching and exhibits studies done in this respect. In the study, the English syllabus was treated as a component of the curriculum preparation phase and thus is not separated from the curriculum as a distinctive entity.

The English language teaching curriculum content has gone through several changes as the research expanded in this field. The number of people willing to learn English increased, as did the concerns and the needs related to teaching it. Consequently, people wanted to learn English for different purposes, which imposed different curricula and syllabuses. It would not be sensible to apply the same curriculum to other cohorts of students with different purposes for learning English. Similarly, it is not logical to leave the preparation of the curriculum and syllabus to solely one unit of the same people, excluding teachers since teachers are the ones who are more knowledgeable on classroom practices, and hence should be involved at all stages of curriculum development (Mwanza & Chishimba, 2023).

Though the necessities changed, the curriculum content and application still carried the traits of previous applications. In other words, they shared many similarities in functions. Graves (2017) supports this by saying that although the approaches to language teaching have changed throughout the years, there are many overlaps and similarities in theory and implementation.

Graves (2016) divided the curriculum related practices into three groups: the linguistic wave, the communicative way, and the third wave. According to him, language, though commonly regarded as a subject, is not a school subject. It is a source to make meaning. Hence, its content needs to be merged into a curriculum. In his description, the linguistic wave is highly dependent on

the forms of language, and the communicative wave highlights the function of language in developing the four macro skills: reading, writing, listening, and speaking. The second wave, popularized as the linguistic wave did not help the learners perform the language in different social settings and did not consider individual needs. Unlike the ones mentioned, the third-wave curriculum considers the learners and the teachers as significant shareholders and their roles in the syllabus-making process are stressed.

In most institutions, teachers are regarded as the means of carrying out the curriculum planned by others. Teachers' role in such situations is like a musician playing a piece of music composed by a different writer. However, teachers' proficiency in the classroom reality is crucial for discerning the problems that call for curriculum remedies (Peretz, 1980). Though Schwab (1973) emphasized the significance of the anticipated learner and the subject matter as the most critical parameters of the syllabus-development process, Elliot and Macdonald (1975) pointed out that a curriculum that considers only learners but not the teachers is never complete, calling for an active participation of teachers in curriculum design.

Teachers' dynamic role in curriculum development enhances their skills and proactive behaviors. The stakeholders, such as teachers, managers, learners, test developers, and curriculum managers, add to the curriculum development with their diverse experiences and opinions. Primarily, teachers as planners and practitioners of the syllabus play a substantial position in developing the curriculum (Cincioğlu, 2014). Put simply, teachers are indispensable in creating and adapting the curriculum and, inevitably, the syllabus. As Sahlberg (2015) claims, "Teachers improve by learning from each other. Isolation is the enemy of all improvement" (p.18). Hence, creating a cycle among teachers to work on curriculum guarantees positive outcomes for the learners and teachers.

In his case study, Hadley (1999) concludes that to adopt the innovations in the curriculum, teachers, being "valuable team members, should be allowed to play a greater part in decisions regarding curriculum, which inevitably affects their classes" (p. 98). In addition, including teachers in the curriculum development and allowing them to participate in its creation is noteworthy as teachers are the ones who practice it in authentic classroom contexts (Dündar & Merç, 2017). If somebody else prepares the curriculum, teachers must spend extra effort to comprehend it as they can better prepare activities for their "students if they are the ones designing those experiences with their particular students in mind" (Bishop & Harrison, 2021, p. 3). Therefore, if they become a part of the process, they will influence the success with their experiences and opinions (Alsubaie, 2016). In his study, Fullan (1991) found that including teachers in the curriculum preparation process led to effective and positive educational changes. Another scholar, Handler (2010), concluded that it is necessary to make teachers a part of the curriculum as they complement it by working collaboratively with curriculum development teams and ensuring the alignment of the content with the learners' needs.

Young et al. (2018) claim that teachers feel a sense of fitting and improve their dialogue with staff when they participate in curriculum preparation. He further asserts that teachers also feel optimistic about improving teaching quality. Teachers who consistently participate in curriculum development advance their skills of professionalization as it mostly depends on the extent of their involvement in such events (Nixon et al., 1997). Additionally, they feel more competent in the teaching and the content when they are not considered as only the receiver of the curriculum (Bennet et al., 1992). In other words, when teachers participate in curriculum activities, whether preparation or adaptation, they develop their skills and feel capable of performing them.

To wrap up, teachers who experience curriculum or syllabus preparation and development feel more competent and enhance their teaching skills, work collaboratively with their colleagues, and improve their dialogue with them. Their acceptance of the curriculum becomes straightforward. After all, it is much more satisfying to play your melody than someone else's after all.

Research questions

Considering the aims, this study deploys a qualitative approach to respond to each research question stated below:

1. Which of the following do English instructors prefer concerning time effectiveness and academic quality of the syllabi, and why?
 - a) A ready-made curriculum prepared by a curriculum unit
 - b) Being part of a collaborative curriculum preparation process
2. How does being part of a collaborative curriculum preparation process affect instructors' instructional practices?
3. What are instructors' suggestions regarding the collaborative curriculum preparation process?

METHOD/MATERIALS

This section clarifies the reader by explaining the participants, the instruments, data collection process and data analysis procedures.

Sample / Participants

Eight English instructors, comprising two men and six women currently working in an English preparatory school of a university in Türkiye, contributed to this study during the academic year of 2023-2024. Purposive sampling was implemented. The sampling method was considered to limit sampling to actively working English preparatory school instructors. All participants had more than ten years of English teaching experience at different universities. They all graduated from one of the universities' foreign language teaching programs like English literature, or English linguistics departments. They all participated in curriculum and syllabus design many times, thus exhibiting a suitable profile to gather data.

Instrument(s)

Deploying a qualitative approach, the data for this study were collected through semi-structured and focus group interviews. The researchers prepared and validated the interview questions on data triangulation, taking the opinions of three field experts and a native English speaker. The interview questions included two parts: The first was designed to collect sociodemographic data (experience, academic degree), and the second consisted of open-ended questions designed to answer the research questions.

Data collection procedures

The context of this study is an English preparatory school of a foundational university in Türkiye. The qualitative research data were collected in two phases after getting the consent forms signed by the interviewees. In the first phase, interviews were conducted face-to-face with purposively selected English instructors working in this preparatory school based on the years of experience, and the departments graduated. Instructors were interviewed separately, and each interview lasted approximately 15 minutes. In the second data collection phase, the interview was designed as a focus group interview where the instructors discussed the interview questions all together at one shot. This phase lasted approximately half an hour. All interviews were recorded with the interviewees' consent and secured on the researchers' computers. The data collection procedure took approximately two weeks.

Data analysis

Thematic content analysis was conducted to find common themes in the data. Following the data collection, the researchers transcribed all the voice-recorded interviews into written form and performed the analyses separately to increase the reliability. A comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was used to analyse the qualitative data from different perspectives. That is, the researchers compared their interpretations of the data to increase the interrater reliability, which could also be considered a manner of triangulation to validate research results more accurately.

To go into more depth in analysis steps, the interviews were recorded first and then transcribed verbatim. Related words and phrases in the responses were then collated and labelled under the relevant codes by the two researchers separately after iterative readings of the data. To ensure further reliability, both researchers, then separately repeated extensive coding of the interviews. After reaching the most repeated codes, they then grouped the codes under discrete categories. The results were compared later to compromise on common themes. After that, each theme went through in-depth analysis to see the connections and make sound conclusions.

Results

Below is a matrix showing the initial codes, categories, and themes driven by the transcribed data. Later, each theme was analyzed separately by providing examples from the transcriptions.

Table 1

Perspectives on the syllabus unit vs. collaborative curriculum preparation

Codes		
Curriculum Unit		Collaborative Curriculum Preparation
Pros	➤ More time-efficient and organized	➤ Feeling more responsible in decision-making
	➤ Being able to see the whole picture	

Codes

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Foreseeing possible problems before they occur ➤ Providing a linear connection among all proficiency levels ➤ Combining feedback gathered over the year and applying it to the prospective curriculum 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Adapting to the process more efficiently ➤ Fewer criticisms/ no offensive criticisms ➤ More critical evaluation of the process ➤ Increased process awareness ➤ A sense of belonging within the institution ➤ The bottom-up process leads to hearing more voices.
Cons	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Top-down process: Being ordered what to do ➤ No different perspectives 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Not being able to see the whole picture ➤ Discrepancies among level syllabi ➤ More hectic and time-consuming ➤ Requiring more organization ➤ Work ethics and allocating equal workload among instructors ➤ Better group dynamics are needed ➤ Problems solved after they occur

Categories

Curriculum Unit	Collaborative curriculum preparation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Organization ➤ Time efficiency ➤ Whole-picture awareness ➤ Connected syllabi ➤ Top-down process 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Increased process awareness ➤ Critical process evaluation ➤ Bottom-up process ➤ Time-consuming ➤ Group dynamics and workload issues in groups ➤ No whole-picture awareness
Themes	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Organizational issues ➤ Pedagogical issues <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Bottom-up vs. top-down processes ○ Syllabus quality and time effectiveness ○ The whole picture and interconnection 	

Theme 1: Organizational issues

There were some differences in the interviewees' ideas regarding the organizational aspects of the two different curriculum preparation processes, as a curriculum unit and as a collaborative curriculum preparation. Participants put forward that the collaborative curriculum preparation process required more organizational preparedness. They noted the problems they experienced during the collaborative curriculum preparation emerging from the lack of careful organization, which is evident in a comment from an interviewee below:

"I saw that curriculum preparation could become more hectic without careful organization. Everybody should know what they are supposed to do, and the workload should be distributed as equally as possible."

In turn, concerning having a curriculum unit, all the participants stated that it was more organized because unit members would know what they were supposed to do, unlike the reported hectic nature of the collaborative curriculum preparation process, as can be seen in the excerpt below:

"I prefer having a curriculum unit in the school. This experience of preparing the curriculum together was a lot more hectic for me because of the lack of necessary arrangements, time, and guidance during the process."

Another concern arose about the organizational difficulties experienced during the collaborative curriculum preparation related to group dynamics and work ethics. The research results highlighted the importance of careful planning and distributing the workload among group members for this collaborative curriculum preparation procedure to work smoothly, as explained by one of the interviewees:

“I think the real problem I experienced during this process was the inequality in the group workload. To clarify, one of my group members and I did all the work normally all the group members should have completed; one member did not actively participate in group task.”

Theme 2: Pedagogical issues

Bottom-up vs. top-down curriculum preparation processes

Participants described two approaches to curriculum preparation processes investigated in this study differently regarding their structural nature. They defined these preparation processes as ‘bottom-up’ and ‘top-down.’ For this article, the terms ‘bottom-up’ and ‘top-down’ refer to workload delegation within a hierarchical organization. ‘Bottom-up’ describes the creation of structural work processes being created and developed by the workforce body that is at once the lowest rank of the management hierarchy and who is to administer said processes. Conversely, ‘top-down’ describes said work processes as being created and developed by a workforce body at any level higher on the management hierarchy. The collaborative curriculum preparation experience was described as a bottom-up process, meaning that all the instructors were involved in the preparation phase, taking more responsibilities, which resulted in increasing their process awareness, as explained in the excerpt below:

“During this new experience, I have felt more responsible for all the decisions made regarding the curriculum. I have also observed the curriculum preparation process closely with all its pros and cons.”

The traditional way of curriculum preparation, which is having a curriculum unit, was described as a top-down process. One interviewee explained that issue as follows:

“When we have a curriculum unit, I feel like I am ordered to do whatever is written in the curriculum without questioning anything. The curriculum becomes a rule to obey because I feel I have no right to change anything in it.”

Curriculum quality and time effectiveness

Some different viewpoints were expressed regarding the quality of the curriculum prepared by a curriculum unit and as a result of the collaborative curriculum preparation process. Results showed that most participants stated the high quality and time effectiveness of the curriculum prepared by a curriculum unit. Correspondingly, the collaborative curriculum preparation process was viewed as time-consuming because of the lack of careful planning, and the curriculum quality was viewed as lower, as stated in an excerpt below:

“The collaborative curriculum preparation process I attended was time-consuming, and the result was not very good. During the semester, we needed to change the syllabi a few times, excluding some units in the books, etc., which shows the low quality of the curriculum prepared.”

Another interviewee stated the following:

“For this collaborative curriculum preparation process to work efficiently, we should have more time, and the group roles should be assigned to each member beforehand. How we did it was not time effective; group members did not do their parts as effectively as we had hoped.”

The whole picture and interconnection

The whole picture awareness, meaning the relation among the different syllabi for each language proficiency level and their interconnection, was another critical concern, according to the study results. Regarding the collaborative curriculum preparation, it was stated that the in-depth analysis and awareness of a single-level syllabus was higher for each group preparing the corresponding one. However, the linear connection among the syllabi was missing because of the inability to see the whole picture. That was not the case in the syllabi prepared by a unit. This issue was noted by one of the interviewees as follows:

“I was responsible for A1 and A2 syllabi; I know them because my colleagues and I prepared them. However, my colleagues told me there were some problems reaching the level objectives in the other syllabi. What I mean is that I think the linearity from the A1 level to the B2 level was not achieved successfully since different groups of instructors were responsible for different syllabi, which led to losing the interconnection among them.”

Discussion

Regarding RQ1, one result reached was that collaborative curriculum preparation was regarded as a more inclusive procedure, leading to all the instructors taking responsibility instead of being provided with one in which instructors did not have a say, and hence instructors would prefer to be included in the process instead of being only the receiver of the curriculum. Yet, the study results illustrated that having a curriculum unit without the inclusion of instructors and collaborative curriculum preparation with the inclusion of instructors had both upsides and downsides. As a novice and inclusive process, collaborative curriculum preparation has some beneficial qualities but requires more careful planning to be used effectively, as mentioned by Fullan (1991) too.

Regarding RQ2, as shown in the study results, the quality of the curriculum and time concerns were related to the organizational and structural issues. They seem to be interrelated, influencing each other and the effectiveness of the whole process. A similar result was reached by Bennet et al. (1992). In terms of in-depth process awareness, the collaborative curriculum preparation seemed adequate, but some problems arose regarding the interconnections of each syllabus for different proficiency levels. Consequently, it was found that careful planning and organization were critical concepts in the collaborative curriculum preparation process.

Regarding RQ3, one of the most critical results attained in this study was that instructors' role in the curriculum preparation process assisted them in feeling more responsible and inclusive in the whole process, supported by Cincioğlu (2014). By taking responsibility for the collaborative curriculum preparation process, participants also stated that they learned from each other, having a significant role in professional development, as Nixon et al. (1997) and Sahlberg (2015) also asserted.

To wrap up, the results of this study demonstrated that having a curriculum unit was somewhat favoured among the participants, perhaps due to their familiarity with the process. However, some concerns in practice were raised about the traditional way of curriculum preparation, which is one prepared by the curriculum unit. As the last point, it can be affirmed that if used in a well-planned and organized way, collaborative curriculum preparation might be a successful way of including all the stakeholders in the process, as supported by Dündar and Merç (2017) and Handler (2010).

Conclusions

In this section, the researchers' suggestions and the participants' recommendations for an inclusive curriculum preparation process are expressed as institutional practices and recommendations for further research are given.

To conclude, collaborative curriculum unit is recommended to be comprised of experts with efficient knowledge of syllabus preparation and curriculum development. Curriculum unit members should have the expertise to guide/train the instructors. Instructors can be provided with checklists or guided questions to evaluate the syllabi and to provide feedback to the curriculum unit. Taking instructors' feedback and assessing the feedback prompt would be crucial. Different viewpoints should be considered when there is a curriculum unit, so it should not be a prescribed process. Instructors should be included, but mostly in adapting an existing syllabus and providing feedback. The study is not without limitations. As it deployed a small-scale case study research design, the number of participants is small, and the research is context-specific, so the results cannot be generalized. Further studies may apply a mixed-method research design, including a larger population from different institutions to draw sound inferences. In addition, current practices in teacher training programs and professional development units in other institutions regarding curriculum preparation might worth searching.

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Statements of publication ethics

We hereby declare that the study has no unethical issues, and that research and publication ethics have been observed carefully.

Güzide Çalışkan and Fulda Karaazmak conceived of the presented idea, developed the theory and performed the computations together. They verified the analytical methods and supervised the findings of this work. Both authors discussed the results and contributed to the final manuscript.

Researchers' contribution rate

The study was conducted and reported with equal collaboration of the researchers.

Ethics Committee Approval Information

Ethical approval for the current study was taken from the Social Sciences & Humanities Ethics Committee at Çankaya University (22/04/2024).

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