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How Students in a Master's of Education Research Program Perceive Academic Writing: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

The objective of this study was to understand how postgraduate students perceive academic writing, the difficulties they encounter, and how they solve them. Adopting a qualitative approach and based on the biographical narrative tradition, we analysed narratives of university students enrolled in a Master's of Education Research Program. This corpus of stories was analysed using the AQUAD software. The results revealed a persistent belief in transmissional writing rather than in epistemic or transactional writing. The main conclusion is that university teaching practices proposing academic writing work should be reviewed in order to give a new meaning to academic writing in postgraduate studies.

Keywords: academic writing, university education, narratives, practice

1. Introduction

In its early days, writing was viewed with suspicion, considered a "pretentious" tool and a mere memory aid, not true wisdom. This challenged cultures that valued direct, oral knowledge above all else. Even prominent thinkers like Plato (1993) criticized the reliance on "bookish knowledge," subtly dismissing readers like Aristotle. This highlights historical doubts about the legitimacy of written information. Fortunately, twenty-five centuries later, and precisely because of its thought-transmitting nature, writing has allowed us to better grasp its communicative nature and in particular, its potential for cognitive transformation. And we are still investigating this potential in today's complex and technology-embedded social contexts (Olson, 1998; Prain & Hand, 2016).

In the last 50 years, research on writing – which is necessarily multifaceted – encompasses a range of notable and interesting contributions: whether from an anthropological perspective (Goody, 1968; Havelock, 1986; Olson & Torrance, 1991), a cognitive one (Magnifico, 2010; Freiman, 2015; Karlen, 2017); in terms of genre (Cordeiro, Castro, & Limpo, 2018; Edwards, Schroeder, & Dugdale, 2018); in the neurological domain (Söderqvist, 2002; Velarde-Consoli & Canals-Gabriel, 2014; Bravo, 2018); technology (Barnard, 2017; Feng et al., 2019); therapeutics (Gu, 2018; Duero & Villegas, 2018); the social sphere (Allal, 2018; Abba, Zhang, & Joshi, 2018); or the field of ethics (Huotari, Kupila, & Löfström, 2017; Grech & Cuschieri, 2018) etc. Such advances in our understanding allow us, in some way, to demythologise and specifically determine the effects of this particular "technology": we better understand how writing contributes to cognitive change as it the written word that generates that symbolic capital, knowledge.

Scorned upon and dismissed for centuries, writing has also been used as an exclusionary practice, demeaning those who were not in possession of such a sophisticated communication system. It also guaranteed early on the survival of organisational-social power structures across virtually all cultures until the present day (Haarmann, 1991; Danvers, Hinton-Smith, & Webb, 2018).

And similarly, writing is regarded today as a natural practice in university classrooms to the extent that it is a cultural belief (Riestra, 1999): it is perceived as a competence acquired on a massive scale in the educational institutional environment, that is neutral, decontextualised, and far removed from power and control relations. Writing is by no means questioned in any way. Its mastery and functionality are indisputable. Yet, such a presumption is somewhat unsettling because it prevents us from addressing the mechanisms underlying its social construction and incorporation.

Certain limiting beliefs surround writing in universities. They convey a crystal-clear model in which the act of writing is erroneously assumed to represent a functional thought-transmission procedure: it is purely descriptive and decontextualised since it can be applied uniformly to any discipline and with little teaching feedback (Álvarez & Yániz, 2015). Writing supposedly reflects the researcher’s neutral and objective results (Badley, 2009), thus shaping a specific university culture of writing (Carlino, 2005).

Nevertheless, we could also say that the richness of our times – with its open horizons and borders – may lead to reversals and new ways of exploring the potential of writing. Other, more promising and creative multiverses are undoubtedly forging ahead (Orozco, 2020; Peinado, 2020).

Today, as we focus on how the technology of writing is able to transform our cognitive structure, numerous works, based on more precise and situated research perspectives, allow us to explore literacy development at elementary institutional levels (Tolchinsky, Ribera & García-Parejo, 2012; Kent & Wanzek, 2016; González-Martín et al., 2017) as well as literacy teaching practices (Dockrell, Marshall, & Wyse, 2016; Ng & Cheung, 2018). But it is at the secondary education level that we encounter a greater volume of works on writing development strategies and instruction (Malpique & Veiga-Simão, 2016; Miller, Scott, & McTigue, 2018). These latter studies describe the process of mastering grammatical, lexical, and textual linguistic standards. One can observe, however, a certain lack of interest in exploring the epistemic nature of writing (Villalón & Mateos, 2009; Pytash, 2016; Sarroub & Pernicek, 2016), which, as commented by Vargas (2016), may explain the limitations verified in universities, and the need for a change of course (Carlino, 2013; Camps & Castelló, 2013; Castelló & Mateos, 2015).

1.1 Academic Writing

In this work, we focus on the academic / university environment. A significant range of studies (Castelló, 2015; Castelló & Cano, 2016; Kuhn, Hemberger, & Khait, 2016) explores not only the nature of writing (Puy, Postigo, & García-Mila, 2016), but also its relationships with other inherent psychological processes (Mangen et al., 2015), as well as the widespread beliefs of students (Wollscheid, Lodding, & Aamodt, 2021) and university faculty (Erráruriz-Cruz, 2020; Hoydalsvik & Osdal, 2020).

Writing informs the mind, as argued by Wells (1987), but not only. Above all, it constitutes an idea-generating process, as many ideas would not emerge if we did not begin to put them on paper (Carlino, 2005). As we write, not only are we trying to convey what we may already know, but also – as Vygotsky used to argue resorting to his contemporary Mandelstam (1998) – the disembodied matter, i.e., what has not yet been materialised in the form of propositions.

Consequently, the latent epistemic nature of academic writing is conditioned by the attitudes (Ekholm, Zumbrunn & DeBusk-Lane 2018), beliefs or conceptions we adopt (Castells et al., 2015). If one wishes to explore sophisticated writing, certain (meta-) cognitive skills are necessary to achieve the potential of knowledge transformation itself (Rai & Lillis, 2013; Strauss, 2017).

We thus limited our study to so-called academic writing and sought to explore how university students interpreted and practiced it.

Academic writing is regarded as one of the thorniest problems in the university context (Epting, 2018), and fortunately, the issue has generated considerable research (Lonka et al., 2018; Van der Loo, Krahmer, & Van Amelsvoort, 2018; French, 2020). These works address the curricular processes that contribute to improving the learning of university academic

writing from different perspectives.

Research on academic writing, and particularly on how it is learned, is based on explanatory models that transcend those resting strictly on reductionist assumptions. The studies support the learning of academic writing by attempting to make the knowledge of writing rules and its tacit ingredients explicit (Elton, 2010). Such research also focuses on how reading plays a key role in academic text composition (Bartels, 2003; Mateos et al., 2008; Epting et al., 2013), as well as appropriate teacher feedback (Saddler, 2012; Krishnan, Black, & Booth, 2021; Jouhar & Rupley, 2021).

On the other hand, more recent research also centres on the role of metacognitive awareness and how it underlies the recurrent processes necessary for compositional self-regulation (Negretti, 2012; Gallego-Ortega, García-Guzmán & Rodríguez-Fuentes, 2013a; Karlen 2017).

Other works highlight a series of typical difficulties faced by novice university learners: the issues of a clearly situated and institutional nature, as students engage in a sort of cultural migration from Secondary education to the University formative stage (Carlino, 2003; 2004); the cognitive operations involved in composition (Martín-Antón et al., 2013; Mena-Marcos, García-Rodríguez, & Tillema, 2013; Álvarez-Álvarez & Boillos-Pereira, 2015); and those that address the emergence of the students' own voices positioning them as knowledge builders and arguers (Boscolo, Arfé, & Quarisa, 2007; Staples et al., 2016; González-Lamas, Cuevas, & Mateos, 2016).

In Spain, a remarkable array of studies continues to map the practice of academic writing in the country's universities. The works point to a conspicuous and unrelenting institutional tendency towards the speaking writing model rather than the transformation of constituted knowledge. This implies that a traditional, vertical knowledge flow is being perpetuated (Marín, López & Roca de Larios, 2015; Álvarez & Yániz, 2015), bypassing the dialogic horizontal relationship which fosters personal reflection, critical argumentation, and textual self-regulation in academic students.

Interesting university programmes addressing the need to improve academic writing are being implemented internationally (Carlino, 2002a; Carlino, 2002b; Carlino, 2007; Moyano, 2010) and in Spain (Gallego-Ortega, García-Guzmán & Rodríguez-Fuentes, 2013b; Agosto-Riera & Mateo-Girona, 2015). Further research is still required, however, on the subject across the range of textual genres and disciplinary fields.

It is from this standpoint that we set the goal of contributing here to research on postgraduate student beliefs. Indeed, we sought to explore their perceptions as they engaged in academic writing in order to uncover their difficulties, thus raising awareness of the problems involved (Riestra, 1999).

The model used to interpret their narratives is based on both cognitive (Scardamalia & Bereiter, 1992; Guida et al., 2018) and socio-cognitive perspectives (Castelló, 2002; Marinkovich, 2002; Badley, 2011; Whitney, Zuidema, & Fredricksen, 2014; Horowitz & Wilburn, 2017; Wagener, 2017; Clayson, 2018; Rispler et al., 2018). We were thus able to

situate the text in relation to its context through interpretations and discussions following more recent compositional approaches.

Specifically, we set out the following research questions:

(1) What meaning do participants give to writing?

(2) What meaning do you give to academic writing after completing a degree?

(3) What are the primary motivations that drive individuals to engage in academic writing?

(4) What self-perceptions do participants have of their own writing competition?

(5) What difficulties, if any, did they detect when working on academic writing assignments in these discursive genres?

(6) How do they believe they could improve their writing skills in academic writing assignments?

2. Method

2.1 Participants

The study was based on the narratives of 81 participants who participated in a Master's of Education Research program. A total of 70.6% of the participants were enrolled in Primary and Early Childhood Teaching degrees. The rest, i.e., 29.4%, were enrolled in other degrees such as Social Work, Physical Education, Psychopedagogy, and Music. A total of 54.3% of the group were aged between 20 and 25 years, 23.5% between 26 and 30 years, 7.6% between 31 and 35 years, 7.4% between 36 and 40, and 7.2% were aged over 41 years. The sample was purposive and non-probabilistic.

2.2 Instrument

In line with the study objective, we used semi-structured interviews (Harrel & Bradley, 2009) that allowed to channel and collect the group's perceptions, interpret their beliefs, and uncover underlying representative patterns. The interview was validated by three qualitative research experts. A prior pilot test was performed using a small sample of participants with a similar academic background, and we subsequently adjusted question formulations.

2.3 Data Collection and Analysis Procedure

The study was based on the narratives of 81 participants who participated in a Master's of Education Research program at a Spanish university during the academic years 2016/17, 2017/18 and 2018/19. An online form was used, which ensured voluntary participation, as well as anonymity and confidentiality.

We followed the narrative-biographical tradition in qualitative research to analyse the corpus. Following its codification, we assigned each research question a corresponding topic and identified the categories that emerged for each question after repeated readings. Using the free qualitative software AQUAD (Huber & Gürtler, 2012), we interpreted the participants'

subjective theorisations (Dwyer & Emerald, 2012). 2017). Data analysis was conducted using the (deductive-inductive) mixed approach that allowed us to configure the category map and also helped to determine the codes. The maps were analysed and validated by four qualitative research experts. The corresponding map of axial codes was created in relation to each topic after repeated readings.

3. Results

3.1 Topic 1: Meaning of Writing in General Terms

We found two distinct ways in which the meaning of writing was theorised. The first was omnipresent in the participants' narratives: it was the speaking writing model. That is, students massively conveyed the ingrained belief that writing is a procedure for pouring, expressing, transmitting, etc. certain thoughts, feelings, or emotions, illustrating what has already been formed in the mind:

> To write is to express ideas, to convey what you think and feel, to be able to communicate with other people. (P005)

> Strikingly, the following conception of writing was identified only once: that actions or verbs such as revising or restructuring made it possible to transform knowledge or to reconstruct reality:

> Writing serves as an instrument that (...) allows us to revise, restructure and question the first thought we write down. (P077)

3.2 Topic 2: The Meaning of Academic Writing

The question implied reflecting on the meaning given to university writing conveyed through the students' discursive genres (End-of-degree project, Practicum or previous essays and monographic works) in which they had the opportunity to elaborate:

> When preparing my End-of-degree project, writing allowed me to collect the excess information I encountered, because my work consisted of historical and documentary research, through various means, simplifying it and then analysing it. Therefore, I used academic writing as a tool to collect, remember, analyse, simplify and reflect on the information I obtained and to then draw my own conclusions. (P022)

The results revealed remarkably uniform thinking patterns. Indeed, the students regarded that this form of writing was subject to certain formal and standard requirements resting on normative and more sophisticated language. It was also related to the selective database search for information that was more specifically technical in nature. However, as stated above, deeply embedded in their descriptions was the same conception of writing as a transmission tool:

> I consider that writing academic texts equates to writing. Writing is transmitting ideas, feelings, opinions, etc. about a certain topic or concept using written words. (P024)

3.3 Topic 3: Assessment of Discursive Genres and Their Motivation

The texts the participants identified as the most interesting were the End-of-degree project, the Practicum, and the essays. The reasons identified and referred to first related to the fact that they allowed and encouraged them to initiate personal methodological research in which they elaborated a theoretical framework, achieved textual coherence, and necessary reflections:

> The most useful assignments were the Practicums and research papers, since we analysed, reflected, and discussed a previous unwritten work in them. (P007)

All students focused on a common denominator: the writing tasks offered a sphere of freedom in which their own ideas could emerge, develop, and be shared. Writing constituted an opportunity to tell and divulge their own experience compared to the other tasks which did not allow them to do so, or which conditioned their personal creativity:

> Essays are the texts that I have found most interesting to work on. Essays were the assignments that offered most flexibility regarding the subject matter. On top of that, they encourage internal dialogue when writing. (P036)

3.4 Topic 4. Self-perceptions of Their Own Writing Competence

Most participants perceived their own writing competence as good, suitable, or effective at achieving their basic academic writing purposes. They attributed it to a positive assessment of their reading level, spelling correctness, their ability to organise and structure ideas, and a certain terminological fluency and accuracy.

> I think my writing competence is of a normal standard, because I can express myself naturally and I don't usually make spelling mistakes, although I also believe that I still have a lot to improve, in terms of more fluent academic-style writing and being able to find the exact words at all times. (P021)

Students also indicated that to achieve textual excellence, it was necessary to invest time and practice in the act of writing. Recursive reading processes and personal text revisions, however, focused mostly on grammatical, semantic or syntactic issues – not on the deeper analysis required by all epistemic writing, such as the importance of argumentative skill to achieve an illuminating exposition of ideas:

> To finish, once I've completed my writing, I revise the text several times to correct different aspects: possible errors, ideas that are not clear enough, etc. (P068)

Although they considered academic writing demanding and difficult at the stage they were at, they showed a clear interest in exploring and developing the skill further over time:

> I think I'm currently drawn to writing critical commentary texts. As an argument, what makes me reflect is the amount of articles I am currently reading. They lead me to reconsider certain questions on the content of what I am reading and to approach the subjects from multiple perspectives. (P053)

3.5 Topic 5: Difficulties in Preparing Academic Texts

Students reflected on difficulties that pertained to certain cognitive operations required to perform academic textualisation, for example, searching for information and selecting it. They also perceived the limiting or trimming of their writing topic or sub-topics as a barrier, as well as the task of connecting and managing all this information, analysing it coherently, relating it, and drawing conclusions:

> I think that what is hardest for me is delimiting the information search for the theoretical framework and connecting the main ideas on which to base my work. (P044)

They highlighted the difficulty of achieving effective communication using a powerful, rigorous, and "scholarly" language:

> My main difficulty has been not knowing exactly how to express myself formally. We tend to be verbose to somehow display some grand linguistic competence but, in the end, we lose the thread of our study and then its meaning. (P010)

Some participants attempted to explain the cause of these difficulties. Their arguments reflected a unanimous feeling that the difficulties stemmed from the educational institution, pointing to its lack of concern to offer more complete training on the writing quality required:

> I think these difficulties come from a lack of writing practice at school, we were always copying and we rarely worked on developing our own writing style. (P023)

3.6 Topic 6: Strategies they Considered Relevant to Improve Their Academic Writing

Their responses were unanimous and lucid, clearly confirming that their own writing competence could still in fact considerably improve but required some basic external tutoring:

> I think so, because the way a person learns is by practicing and being accompanied by expert guidance. (P033)

But they also identified another external corrective agent: the reading of other academic works. The latter represents a synergistic writer expertise process allowing to build a deeper understanding of appropriate textual structures:

> I could improve my skill by practicing and being exposed to different academic papers and texts, to understand their structure and to do better work. (P030)

And as stressed by one participant, there was a third strategy, in this case an attitudinal one, i.e., daring to ask for help to improve one's writing. This strategy unveiled a feeling of vulnerability that was barely perceptible in the participants:

> By seeking help (even if it's a bit embarrassing) you can achieve at least some improvement. (P012)

4. Discussion and Conclusions

Regarding our first research question, we found that entrenched in the students was the

conception of writing as a thought-recording technology. Numerous studies in other latitudes have found the same results (Álvarez & Yániz, 2015; Pug 2004; Ekholm, Zumbrunn, and DeBusk-Lane 2018). However, we were struck by the quasi-complete absence of at least four writing dimensions: the aesthetic, creative, ethical, and emotional dimensions of writing. Owing to length limitations, we will address only the emotional dimension here.

The participants described writing as emotionality-sensitive material, and in different ways: projection of the affective world, cathartic function, etc. Yet, paradoxically, their own reflections did not show the emotional dimension of the act of writing. The pleasure of writing, as a personal, intimate activity appeared to be faint indeed in the narratives analysed. A powerful motivation for teachers to successfully develop writing competence is one's own writing enjoyment. Surprisingly, however, those in charge of social demands for the teaching of writing (Gooda, 2016) adopt a neutral tone and display emotional coldness in their reflections on the significance of writing.

Regarding the second question, we also consistently noticed a widespread skin-deep concern for the meaning of writing, in this case academic writing (Mateos et al., 2008). Students certainly did not refer in their reflections to specific cognitive operations (Scardamalia & Bereiter, 1992; Egbert et al., 2016), nor metacognitive ones (Negretti, 2012; Karlen, 2017; Castelló, 2015).

Also left outside the participants' scrutiny were issues such as: the need for prior planning (Epting et al., 2013); the importance of preparing drafts to revise the textual production; or the necessary emergence of the author's own voice (Corcelles, Castelló & Mayoral, 2015).

Owing to its superficial nature, such a biased vision distanced and prevented students from questioning themselves and gaining insights into their own beliefs about epistemic writing.

Their conceptions of the speaking writing model were still engrained because, among other reasons, their texts were insufficiently revised by teachers (Carlino, 2004). The demands made upon them, on the other hand, are not those typically required of genuine researchers, but of a student body having to submit their work within the deadlines dictated by the teaching staff across a range of subjects (Vargas, 2016).

Regarding the third question, one specific point in all the narratives was of particular interest: in their End-of-degree projects and their Practicums, Essays or Monographic works, the main action they described was that of capturing, expressing, writing, telling, etc. their personal experience (Camps & Castelló, 2013; Castelló and Mateos, 2015) – whether they emphasised their methodological processes or their specific classroom adventures. Once again, the main writing objective corresponded to speaking writing model actions, or conveying snippets of incipient professional life at school (Scardamalia & Bereiter, 1992; Villalón & Mateos, 2009). Once more, writing signified putting on paper (Olson, 1998) what had been thought, lived, felt. The conception still failed to push the practice beyond certain boundaries, i.e.: planning the written word ahead; considering the complex processes of translation into text and argumentation; the inevitable text revisions and adjustments to potential readers, becoming aware of consequent mental activity (Carlino, 2013; Marín et al., 2015); the

demands for a more sophisticated written composition process allowing a personal, introspective, dialogic voice to emerge— one that builds new meanings beyond the recording of what was lived or felt (Rai & Lillis, 2013; Billot & King, 2015).

With respect to the fourth question, we found "reasonably healthy" and generalised self-perceptions of being competent writers. Yet they still unanimously believed in and assumed a transmission model of writing (Carlino, 2007; Agosto-Riera & Mateo-Girona, 2015). We found no sign of any epistemic or transactional writing model (Marín, López & Roca-de Larios, 2015) and interpreted a generalised assumption that academic writing competence was built over time and practice, through reading. It was also believed to be constructed by focusing essentially on linguistic, grammatical, orthographic, morphosyntactic and semantic normative aspects (breadth and precision of the terms used in the academic text). Similar results have been found in previous works in both Spain and internationally (Carlino, 2005; Villalón and Mateos, 2009; Camps and Castelló, 2013; Castelló and Mateos, 2015; Álvarez & Yániz, 2015).

In line with the above, overlooked were the metacognitive capacities leading to automatically and repeatedly revising the text from multiple perspectives. Such a process is conducive to testing new meanings when communicating thought. In the same way, absent in the reflections were the development of argumentative strategies (Badley, 2009) and the synthesis and filtering of meanings found in previous readings. This prevents literal quotations of selected references from extracting and expressing what the writer should say. But also evaded in their narratives was the clear importance of adjusting the text to the context and slow, thoughtful planning – instead of a precipitated or impulsive one – of a structure that would somewhat act as the backbone of the written discourse – often unfolding over a heavy, solitary journey.

Once again, the transmission model beliefs continued to be acutely ingrained in their minds. Yet, such findings also offer us critical keys (Carlino, 2013; Prain & Brian, 2016) to exchange these conceptions for others, opening horizons for them to creatively build their own thoughts.

When answering the fifth question, they focused logically and coherently on structural, linguistic and formal language problems. Consequently, at no time did they consider the difficulty of planning the composition before starting to textualise it (Corcelles, Castelló & Mayoral, 2015; Karlen, 2017). The need to develop argumentative competence was exceptionally pointed out (Malpique & Veiga-Simão, 2016; Puy, Postigo & García-Mila, 2016) as a key competency to test and reconstruct possible meanings in writing, insofar as it requires elaborating a personal viewpoint by orchestrating a polyphony of authors.

Nor did they refer to the need for written text sedimentation to prevent forging it too hastily, and to thus properly prepare for reflection (Mendoza, 2003; Tierney, 2014).

Another blind spot could be observed in their descriptions of academic writing the difficulties: the various emotional states (fears, anxieties, etc.) which they would inevitably undergo during their writing process (Huerta, Goodson, Beigi & Chlup, 2017). Nor did they mention

the need to make their own voice emerge, or the ethical considerations invariably projected in their writing (Burroughs & Barkauskas, 2017), subject as they are to the authorities they usually answer to.

Finally, regarding the sixth research question about the most relevant strategy to improve their writing competence, the participants underlined a barrier they had to overcome: text correction by writing experts. They thus overlooked the internal process of deconstruction, construction, and reconstruction, implicit in any academic writing in which new connections are created between the various selected materials (Badley, 2009; Tierney, 2014). In the same way, they failed to centre on the prior planning phase and sedimentation of ideas that would be inevitably leveraged as they unravel during their writing process (Marín, López & Roca de Larios, 2015).

In addition, they indicated how they believed in the act of individual academic reading to facilitate and make them aware of the intricacies of sophisticated written composition procedures. But, in our opinion, this approach is insufficient given the complexity of the act of writing. In this sense, our participants did not show that they were aware of the relevance of creating participatory structures to hold collective debates on readings or written production (Carlino, 2013). For them, writing practice continued to be conceived as individual and solitary work (Schindler & Wolfe, 2014).

Finally, we observed, almost symbolically the strategic signalling of that great emotional frontier that they also had to overcome: the fear of public scrutiny. That is, of having their writing reviewed in a regular and standardised way. The latter reflected one of those forms of invisible conditioning that needs to be made explicit and addressed (Laws, 2004; Huerta et al., 2017).

Writing is essential to shaping our thoughts and involves a demanding search for words, because without them, as Osip Mandelstam poeticized, "I have forgotten the word I wanted to pronounce and my thought returns to the realm of shadows."

In summary, our interest has been to explore academic writing, which is situated in nature, and perhaps mixed-method studies could be designed to identify similarities or contrasts in other geographical and cultural contexts. Furthermore, this qualitative research could be expanded to understand the development of academic writing skills through the use of technological resources such as Artificial Intelligence.

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Authors contributions

Prof. Dr. AGG, Prof. Dr. MJIM and Prof. Dr. ILC were responsible for study design and revising. Dr. AGG and Dr. ILC were responsible for data collection. Prof. Dr. AGG and Dr. MJIM drafted the manuscript and Prof. Dr. MJIM and Dr. ILC revised it. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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