

## Assessing Students' Mastery of the Key Phenomena of Child Development

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### Abstract

For over half a century, psychology was a science confined to a narrow circle of specialists. Today, it is an elective subject in most American educational institutions and one of the required core disciplines in many pedagogical programs. However, as experience shows, this humanitarian science is not among the easiest to comprehend. From this perspective, improving the methodology for assessing the assimilation of psychological knowledge appears to be a relevant and promising research task. Sixty graduate students participated in our study. We examined their understanding of key phenomena in child development, such as J. Piaget's concept of object permanence, L. Vygotsky's cognitive-emotional-volitional triad, and A. Bandura's theory of learning through observation and imitation. The stimulus material was A.P. Chekhov's short story Grisha, whose main character, a boy aged 2 years and 8 months, demonstrates all of the above qualities. The students were tasked with determining whether the story's protagonist had fully developed these traits. According to the results, the participants were relatively successful in identifying text fragments that illustrated the psychological phenomena under study. However, many of them encountered significant difficulties when interpreting the content of these fragments. It was found that the primary reason for these challenges was a lack of skills in systematic and organized analytical activity. These findings suggest directions for improving the methodology of teaching psychology to non-specialists. Teaching complex psychological concepts to students while simultaneously training them in analytical thinking skills appears to be the most productive approach.

*Keywords:* J. Piaget, object permanence, L. Vygotsky, perceptual triad, A. Bandura, social learning, A. Chekhov, psychological prose, training for schoolteachers

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## Introduction

Improving the methods of teaching psychology is one of the most important tasks of modern humanistic education. In a society where psychology has ceased to be a narrow discipline, and where the demand among non-psychologists for a deeper understanding of psychological knowledge has significantly increased, there is a growing need for well-designed instructional approaches. They will prevent the superficial comprehension of this science by a broader audience. Psychology is the scientific study of the principles and processes underlying human mental functions, behavior, interpersonal communication, and purposeful activity. The quality of its instruction in educational institutions will undoubtedly influence how deeply we understand the human being—his/her needs and transformation in our rapidly changing world. As scientist state, without deep understanding of humans, we may lose both technology and culture.

This work is devoted to exploring of how psychological knowledge—some key phenomena of child development—is acquired by graduate students, who are current and prospective schoolteachers. In this study, fiction literature was used which illustrated these key phenomena: social learning originated by Albert Bandura (1925-2021), object permanence discovered by Jean Piaget (1896-1980), and perceptual triad described by Vygotsky (1896-1934).

### Literature as a Method of Teaching Psychology

The use of literature for educational purposes is a very old and fruitful tradition. It arose more than two millennia before the birth of psychology as an independent science.<sup>1</sup> For ancient Greek and Roman philosophers, literature served as a means of educating children and youth, developing their personality, morality, erudition, and communication skills. Socratic dialogues in the works of Plato were educational literature that formed the mental and moral qualities of the reader (Plato, 380 B.C.E.; Reid, 1998). In ancient Rome, all forms of education were associated with reading, copying, memorizing, and analyzing the great examples of classical literature of the time (Johnson, 2010).

Ancient pedagogical theories were repeated in key trends of following historical epochs. Educators of the Renaissance based their teaching on classical works and emphasized the importance of both ancient and modern literature for human development. Like philosophers of the past, the most brilliant thinkers of the Enlightenment viewed literature as a universal tool that provides readers with an understanding of the world necessary for their social, ethical, and civic maturation (Locke, 1830). So, valuable ideas of the past regarding the importance of literature for education did not disappear but were transformed and “woven into the fabric” of world humanistic pedagogy. Psychology has borrowed and applied this method in accordance with its mission and goals.

Literature as a method of teaching psychology was widely used by representatives of the psychoanalytic school. Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) and his followers turned to the outstanding works of the ancients—Greek myths, drama, and fairy tales—to explain the functioning of deep mental processes (Bettelheim, 2010; Freud, 1997; Jung, 1971). In their practice, literature became an instrument of treatment of mild to moderate mental health

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<sup>1</sup> As an independent science, psychology appeared in Germany in 1879 when Wilhelm Wundt founded the first experimental laboratory at the University of Leipzig and started systematic studies of human mental processes.

issues. In the mid-50s, Eric Berne (1910–1970), an American psychotherapist and the founder of transactional analysis, employed the best-known fairy tales to illustrate his new theory (Berne, 1972). Over time, popular fairy tales, as well as other literary genres, became widely used in the mental health industry for treating and preventing traumas and mild neurotic disorders, and fostering patients' self-awareness and education. This therapeutic approach became formally known as bibliotherapy (also referred to as literary or reading therapy) (Canty, 2017; Correll et al., 2024; Dovey, 2015; Lindberg, 2024).

The development of literature itself, the emergence of such a genre as psychological prose, expanded the boundaries of its application. It turned out to be excellent illustrative material for explaining psychological ideas, concepts and theories. Indeed, in addition to the well-conscious reality, verbal narration reflects the unconscious patterns of human mental activity and behavior. Literary plots, characters, and their relationships are a kind of repository of knowledge about the inner world of people. Thus, the method of teaching psychology using literary works has entered the academic environment (Boyatzis, 1992; Pitts, 1978; Psychology in Literature, 2015; Toom, 2013a, 2013b; 2015).

## Methodology of the Study

### Goal, Tasks, and Hypotheses

The study aimed to implement the method of literary illustrations for assessing the mastery of psychological knowledge by students-educators studying psychology as a core discipline in their educational program.

The study was based on the following hypotheses:

1. Psychological prose describing the human inner world and behavior is an adequate representation of reality and a suitable stimulus material for the study of students' understanding and comprehension of psychological phenomena.
2. The computerized format of the study allows for more accurate and detailed recording of students' reasoning and analysis of their answers.

The study tasks were:

1. To analyze students' mastery of such psychological developmental phenomena as perceptual triad, object permanence, and social learning.
2. To find possible causes of students' insufficient comprehension of these phenomena illustrated in psychological prose.

### Instrumentation and Stimulus Material

One of the practical assignments of the course was selected for the study. The course was conducted in an asynchronous online format, so the study can be categorized as a computerized survey. The data received were analyzed with the use of simplified content analysis. The study participants' assimilation of psychological knowledge was explored through Anton Chekhov's short story *Grisha*<sup>2</sup> (201 stories by Anton Chekhov, n.d.).<sup>3</sup> This literary work is a classic example of psychological prose. The story describes a day in the life of a two-year-eight-months old boy. After a long and cold winter, he is taken out for a walk

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<sup>2</sup> Grisha is a Russian name, short for Grigoriy, the Russian version of the English name Gregory.

<sup>3</sup> Anton Pavlovich Chekhov (1860–1904) is a prominent Russian writer known as the greatest master of world psychological prose.

for the first time. He walks along the boulevard with his nanny and gets to know the world beyond his nursery room. The story contains vivid and detailed descriptions of how a child perceives the new objects and people outside of his home, how he copes with unusual experiences, and how he thinks, speaks, forms concepts, and comprehends knowledge essential for his further understanding of reality.

### **Study Participants**

Sixty students from the Graduate School of Education participated in this study in Fall 2024 and Spring 2025. All of them were current and prospective schoolteachers and attended the author's online course of *Child Development and Learning in the Cultural Context* at Touro University. A group of participants included 41 women and 19 men. Regarding their ethnicity, 65% individuals were Caucasians, 20% were Latin Americans, 11% were African Americans, and 4% were Asian Americans. English was a native language for fifty-five individuals, and remaining five people positioned themselves as bilingual.

### **Procedure**

In completing their course assignment, students read Chekhov's short story and then answered three questions related to the three phenomena of child development being studied:

1. In which story's fragments is Grisha's perceptual triad (PT) illustrated?
2. Has Grisha developed J. Piaget's object permanence (OP)?
3. How would A. Bandura explain Grisha's communication delay (SL)?

An important condition for completing this practical assignment was the justification of the opinions. When answering questions, the study participants had to cite/describe excerpts from the text as evidence.

### **Data Analysis**

#### **Question 1**

The study participants were asked to find in which story's fragments presented in the №3 column of Table 1 a perceptual triad is illustrated. They made choices and wrote down the answers "Yes"/ "No" in the № 4 column of the table. To support their opinion, they highlighted in the text of the selected fragments the key components of the perceptual triad: words that denote sensation, emotion, and motor action. In Table 1, a typical answer to this question is shown. The components of the perceptual triad identified by a student are highlighted in colors: sensations in orange, emotions in blue, and motor actions in green.

**Table 1***A Typical Student's Answer Including the Text's Analysis and the Professor's Comments*

1. № fr.	2. A student's comments	3. Search for fragments illustrating the perceptual (S-E-M) triad	4. A student's answer: yes/no	5. Professor's comments
1.		There stands Grisha's chair on high legs, and on the wall hangs a clock which exists to swing its pendulum and chime. From the dining-room, one can go into a room where there are red armchairs. Here, there is a dark patch on the carpet, concerning which fingers are still <u>shaken</u> at Grisha.	No	Correct
2.	<b>Sensation</b>  <b>Emotion</b>  <b>Motor action</b>	He <b>hears</b> a fearful tramping. A crowd of soldiers, with red faces and bath brooms under their arms, move in step along the boulevard straight upon him. Grisha <b>turns cold with terror</b> and looks inquiringly at nanny to know whether it is dangerous. But she neither weeps nor runs away, so there is no danger. Grisha looks after the soldiers and begins to <b>move his feet in step</b> with them himself.	Yes	Correct  You found a perceptual triad: sensation, emotion, and action
3.		The brightness of the sun, the noise of the carriages, the horses, the bright buttons are all so impressively new and not dreadful that Grisha's soul is filled with a feeling of enjoyment and he begins to laugh.	No	Incorrect
4.	<b>Sensation</b>  <b>Emotion</b>	Here there is a great deal of <b>smoke</b> , there is a <b>smell</b> of roast meat [...]. The cook and the nurse kiss each other and sit down on the bench together with the man and begin talking in a low voice. Grisha, wrapped up as he is, <b>feels insufferably hot and stifled</b> .	Yes	Incorrect.  These are sensations, not emotions. There is no perceptual triad here.

The principle of categorizing the answers was as follows. If no mistakes were made in the analysis of all four fragments, then the student's answer to the first question was considered correct. If mistakes were made in all four fragments, then the student's answer to this question was considered incorrect. In all other cases, the student's answer was categorized as incomplete.

## Question 2

The study participants were asked whether Grisha had already developed his OP. They should make their conclusions and support their opinions by finding two text fragments that contain evidence of existing/not existing the OP.

The following rules were adopted to categorize the answers: 1. The combination of a correctly identified fragment with a correct conclusion and a correct justification presented the correct answer. 2. An incorrectly identified fragment was considered the wrong answer. 3. All other types of answers formed the category of incomplete answers.

In Table 2, in a typical answer to this question, key phrases representing the conclusion and rationale are highlighted in bold. This answer has the status of incomplete because, although the student found the correct fragment, he made the incorrect conclusion and justification.

**Table 2**

*A Typical Answer to Question 2 With the Professor's Feedback*

Student's answer	Professor's comments
<p><b>Definition:</b> According to Piaget, "Object permanence is the understanding that even if something is out of sight, it still exists" (Bogartz, Shinsky, &amp; Schilling, 2000).</p> <p><b>Example:</b> "Where does she disappear to?" Grisha has more than once looked under the bed, behind the trunk, and under the sofa, but she was not there." (Chekhov, n.d.). When she is not next to him, he thinks that she must be hiding within his room, and, since he does not find her, <b>he believes that she does not exist at all.</b></p> <p><b>Grisha's object permanence is not yet formed.</b></p>	<p>This definition alone is insufficient for making a solid conclusion.</p> <p>The correct example is found but it is wrongly interpreted.</p> <p>Wrong conclusion. Mental representation of the object (the aunt's image in the child's memory) proves that the boy's OP formation is rather in progress.</p>

## Question 3

The study participants were asked how Albert Bandura, the author of social learning theory, would explain Grisha's communicative delay. They were expected to give their answer supporting it by the two text fragments, which contained evidence. It was expected from them that they would come true to the ideas of Bandura, supplementing them with in-text-citations and supporting their statement by at least two examples from the story's text. Based on these conditions, the criteria for evaluating answers were formulated. The answer was considered correct if the statement made was adequate to Bandura's ideas. The answer was considered wrong if the statement was inadequate, even if the rest of the conditions were followed. An answer was considered incomplete if at least one supporting example from the story was omitted.

In Table 3, a typical answer to this question is shown. This answer is categorized as the correct one because it follows all requirements. As confirmation of Bandura's ideas, correct examples of the adult characters' treatment of the child were found.

**Table 3***A Typical Answer to Question 3 With the Professor's Feedback*

A student's answer (fragment)	Professor's comments
<p>Grisha's father is <b>neglectful</b>. His mother and nanny are <b>improper models</b> for him to develop speech and communication skills.</p> <p>For example, when Grisha decided to run after cats, his nanny <b>harshly grabbed his shoulder</b>: "Stop! Where are you off to? Haven't you been told not to be naughty?" Instead of educating the kid through good language the nanny <b>yells and harms</b> him for his actions.</p>	<p><b>Good</b> observations of adult behavior towards Grisha</p> <p>An <b>excellent example</b> of the nanny's harsh style of communicating with the child.</p>

## Results

Data analysis allowed us to identify the following:

1. The overwhelming majority of responses to each of the three questions fell into the category of "incomplete."
2. Incomplete answers are the most diverse category—the justification for the answers demonstrates different kinds of errors—they could be unclear, contradictory (wrong and right examples are represented as proof at the same time), unfounded (examples were not presented), and even fictitious (examples did not belong to the text).
3. The correct selection of examples does not ensure a full and deep understanding of the examples' content. The choice of examples provided might be correct, but their interpretation is not always adequate.
4. Errors in the interpretation of such psychological phenomena as Vygotsky's PT, Piaget's OP and Bandura's SL illustrated in the narrative are caused by the insufficiency of some aspects of thinking skills associated with understanding literary texts.

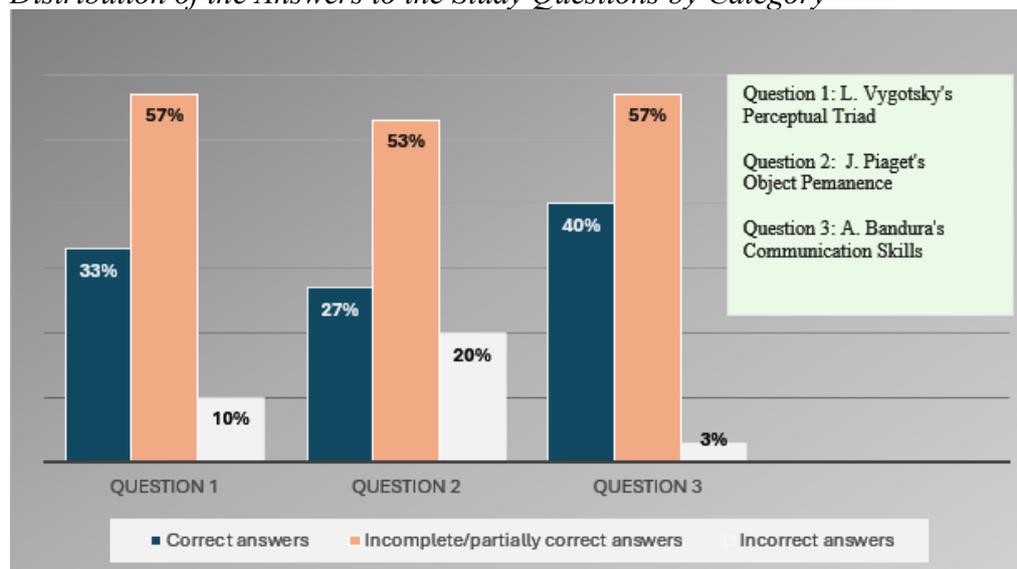
The numerical results of the study are presented in Figure 1.

## Discussion

An analysis of the errors made by the study participants when answering questions suggested possible causes of an insufficient comprehension of phenomena under the study within the investigated population.

### Finding Vygotsky's Perceptual Triad

In his work "Early Childhood," L. Vygotsky wrote that perception is the leading mental function of a child from one to three years of age, and it is characterized by two important features. Firstly, it is emotionally colored, and secondly, it is directly connected with motor functions, i.e., with action (1984). Everything that the child feels with his senses is accompanied by his emotional experiences. Each thing is charged with an emotionally attractive or repulsive force, and it stimulates him to act. Everything that he sees makes him excited and motivates him to touch it: "His finger is in every pie." This unity of sensation, emotion, and motor reaction—let's call it a perceptual triad—is very figuratively illustrated in Chekhov's story using the example of the toddler Grisha.

**Figure 1***Distribution of the Answers to the Study Questions by Category*

The most striking and convincing example of the perceptual triad is the fragment of the text where Grisha looked at horses for the first time in his life. In Table 1, it is presented in fragment # 2. The student correctly pointed to all three components, i.e., “hears” referred to an auditory sensation, “turns cold with terror” was an emotion, and “moves his feet in step” was a motor action.

However, the presence of a PT in fragment #3 was not obvious for this student, although all three components were present. The bright sun and buttons, as well as the noise of the carriages, brought new sensations to Grisha. They were joyful and stimulated positive emotions in the child. His sensations and emotions were accompanied by an immediate motor action: laughing.

On the contrary, in fragment # 4, the student saw a PT where it is not present. He correctly categorized the word “smell” as a sensation but incorrectly attributed the sensations of “heat” and “stiffness” to the category of emotion and forgot about motor action altogether.

Errors in detecting components of PT can be explained as follows. Mental phenomena have their representations both in scientific language and in the language of everyday life. Fiction abounds in everyday concepts. To understand and analyze literary texts from a scientific point of view means finding scientific equivalents for everyday concepts. This is facilitated by extensive experience in handling texts and good reading skills. Apparently, many study participants did not have sufficient reading skills, had a small vocabulary, and experienced difficulties in moving from the system of everyday concepts to the system of scientific ones.

It is known that younger generations, carried away by computer games and immersed in the digital world, lose the need to read books and therefore do not acquire the skills to analyze literary texts. Confirming facts were found by the author of this work as well as other researchers and representatives of various cultures (Chtenie v epokhu tsifry, 2024; Karpov & Voronova, 2022; Klopotova & Smirnova, 2024; Schwartz, 2024; Teaching in UK, n.d.; Toom, 2015; Toom & Inshakova, 2019; Twenge, 2018).

## Recognizing Piaget's Object Permanence

OP is one of the most intriguing phenomena of human development. It is this very concept that causes the great bewilderment of the young protagonist in Chekhov's story. Unsurprisingly, the study participants found this question—whether Grisha had developed OP—to be the most challenging.

By definition, OP is a child's understanding that an object does not cease to exist even if it disappears from sight (Cherry, 2023; McLeod, 2025). This concept's development is closely linked to memory, and memory trace is the neurophysiological basis of OP. Additionally, OP is associated with the simultaneous evolution of other concepts, such as spatial awareness, temporal understanding, and cause-and-effect relationships. If the child does not master them, their concept of OP suffers. Thus, the shaped concept of OP means the recognition that the object persists across different contexts, settings, and moments in time. Usually, OP is formed around age two.

Table 2 shows a typical answer to the question of whether Grisha has formed OP. The student found a fragment in the story that describes the boy's memories of his aunt. The choice of the fragment is correct. However, further reasoning led the student to the false conclusion about the absence of OP: "Since he does not find her, he believes that she does not exist at all." Many students were similarly confused by Grisha's decision to look for his aunt "under the bed, behind the trunk, and under the sofa." Only a few study participants recognized that the boy's behavior was completely consistent with the entire logic of his life—he was searching for his aunt where he usually saw her, in his room. After all, he was not yet familiar with the world outside his home. He simply couldn't imagine her anywhere else.

Grisha is two years and eight months old. He remembers not only that his aunt sometimes visits and once gifted him the drum but also the events of the current day. He is biologically quite mature for having the OP. In the case of his aunt, who is not a central figure in his life, Grisha's OP concept is just in the process of formation. The idea that the concept of OP is not developed towards the aunt is wrong.

His family is a completely different matter. Mama, Papa, and the cat are central figures in his world. He remembers them even after leaving home; he knows that they continue to exist and knows where they can be. He dreams about having them with him on the boulevard on that clear and sunny April day. "He wants to say that it would be just as well to take with them Papa, Mama, and the cat, but his tongue does not say what he wants to" (201 stories, n.d.). He transfers them in his imagination from the house to the boulevard and manipulates their images. The formed permanence of objects is evident here.

The main reason for errors in answering the question about Grisha's OP was the lack of contextual thinking. Many students did not understand that determining the presence of OP cannot be built based on one short definition or an isolated fragment. As it is impossible to make a diagnosis based on a single symptom, it is also impossible to draw conclusions on the development of a complex psychological phenomenon based on a single indicator. The entire narrative must be involved in the search for an answer. All indicators must be found in the text and analyzed in their relationship with each other—the child's age, his ability to remember, familiarity with the outside world, and, in particular, with the object in relation to which the presence of permanence is determined.

Contextual thinking develops in the course of neurophysiological and social maturation. It is one of the most important aspects of logical thinking that appears at the last stage of cognitive development, according to Piaget. None of our students have ever been specially taught this, and those of them who applied this thinking strategy when analyzing the text did so rather spontaneously and intuitively. Since this has proven productive, teaching this thinking strategy should become the subject of special training accompanying the study of psychology (Kalashnikov, 2019).

### **Identifying Bandura's Social Learning**

The third question was perhaps the easiest of all because the correct answer was already contained in its formulation. According to the content of the story, the boy Grisha really demonstrates communication delay: for his age, he speaks poorly, preferring the language of facial expressions and gestures to the language of words. In support of this fact, the students carefully stated the provisions of social learning theory and cited sources (Bandura, 1977). However, many of them ignored the need to substantiate their statements: they did not provide any supporting examples from the text. Unsubstantiated answers accounted for more than a third of all incomplete answers.

Such an unfocused manner of presentation is characteristic of non-rigorous thinking. Many study participants demonstrated a lack of skills in systematic and organized text analysis; it is their responses that were often incomplete or inaccurate.

The category of correct answers was replenished by participants who analyzed the story thoroughly, first dividing the text into fragments to facilitate step-by-step, chronological examination. These participants were able to identify the causes of Grisha's delayed communicative development and illustrate key ideas from A. Bandura's theory. This strategy has proven its effectiveness and given a reason to assume that teaching the skills of systematic and organized intellectual activity in the process of analyzing fiction can be carried out using P. Galperin's method of "step-by-step formation of mental actions" (Galperin, 1969).

Being generalized, the results of these study participants' analysis of the text looks like this. During the entire day described in the story, no one talks to Grisha, and no one explains anything to him to satisfy his childish curiosity. The parents are busy with themselves; the nanny, with whom Grisha spends most of her time, is ignorant, rude, and verbally abusive. That day, only a stranger "with shiny button" treated the boy kindly, and the only person who once gave him a toy was his aunt. (Maybe that's why he is constantly looking for her?) There are no suitable models for observation and imitation around this child. He is deprived of the social environment necessary for the timely and successful development of his communication skills.

### **Conclusions**

The acquisition of knowledge of psychological phenomena depended on the ability of students to analyze, with sufficient depth and accuracy, the text of a literary work containing descriptions of these phenomena. Four factors responsible for errors in text analysis were identified:

- Loss of interest in reading among today's students, which results in a limited vocabulary and difficulty in applying scientific concepts when interpreting psychological phenomena.
- Lack of experience in organizing and structuring information during intellectual activity.
- Weak analytical skills manifested in a comparative analysis of theoretical models of these phenomena with their textual illustrations.
- Lack of contextual thinking necessary for comprehending literary texts.

The teaching of psychology in the third millennium—in the digital era—requires not only an informative but also a competency-based approach, which involves students having formal operational thinking skills, as well as the ability to interpret behaviors. These skills are especially significant for teachers. Thus, traditional lecture forms of learning should be supplemented with methods of analyzing concrete real-life situations, working with literary texts, and using information technologies.

The use of fiction literature to assess the acquisition of psychological knowledge, although a fruitful research method, must be carried out with consideration of the specific cognitive characteristic of today's students. Already belonging to the digital world, young generations have been losing the need to read and the ability to analyze texts. This may place certain limitations on research based on reading fiction.

Teaching complex psychological concepts to students while simultaneously training them to develop skills for structured intellectual activity and higher forms of thinking appears to be the most productive approach. Perhaps P. Galperin's method of "step-by-step formation of mental actions," adapted to the format of specific verbal problems-solving tasks, can be especially useful. With the gradual assimilation of strategies for performing mental actions, the necessary thinking skills will be internalized and automated.

### **Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process**

The author declares that Quill Bot and ChatGPT40, AI-assisted writing software, was used in proofreading and refining the language used in the manuscript. The usage was limited to correcting grammatical and spelling errors and rephrasing statements for accuracy and clarity. The author further declares that, apart from mentioned instruments, no other AI or AI-assisted technologies have been used to generate content in writing the manuscript. The ideas, design, procedures, findings, analyses, and discussion are originally written and derived from careful and systematic conduct of the research.

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