Enhancing learner autonomy in teamwork skills: Strategies of Vietnamese tertiary EFL teachers in a changing educational landscape

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: This study explores the strategies used by Vietnamese tertiary English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers to promote learner autonomy in teamwork skills, crucial in the evolving context of language education in Vietnam.

Design/Methodology/Approach: Employing semi-structured interviews, the research involved nine EFL teachers from two Vietnamese educational institutions, representing various career stages: novice, mid-career, and near-end career.

Findings: Analysis through thematic frameworks revealed that teachers utilize diverse methods like collaborative learning projects, reflective practices, technology-enhanced learning, and real-world tasks. These strategies, adaptable to the Vietnamese cultural and educational context, proved effective across different teaching stages.

Conclusion: The findings underscore the importance of contextually adapted teaching strategies, the increasing role of technology in EFL education, and the value of experiential learning. It demonstrates how Vietnamese EFL teachers' approaches can significantly impact learner autonomy in teamwork skills. This research contributes to the literature by providing insights into effective EFL teaching strategies within non-native English-speaking environments, offering valuable perspectives for educators, curriculum designers, and policymakers.

Research Limitations: The study identifies limitations, including a small sample size and reliance on qualitative data, suggesting the need for broader research with diverse methodologies.

Practical Implications: This research emphasizes the necessity for culturally adapted teaching strategies and technological integration in EFL education to enhance learner engagement.

Contribution to Literature: The study emphasizes the efficacy of context-specific tactics in enhancing learners' abilities, providing significant perspectives for educators and policymakers on enhancing EFL teaching practices through experiential learning and digital resources.

1. INTRODUCTION

This research focuses on the enhancement of learner autonomy (LA) in teamwork skills within the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education at Vietnamese tertiary institutions. Its main objective is to uncover the methods used by Vietnamese tertiary-level EFL educators to promote LA, particularly in teamwork skills. This work is very significant due to its potential to make valuable contributions to the broader area of language instruction and its capacity to impact pedagogical techniques in similar contexts. The significance of LA in EFL has been extensively documented, emphasizing its impact on language proficiency and learner motivation (Yen et al., 2023a). This study zeroes in on the specific strategies employed by Vietnamese tertiary EFL teachers to bolster LA teamwork skills (García, López, Molina, Casas, & Morales, 2016). Specifically, this study delves into the strategies Vietnamese EFL

teachers at the tertiary level adopt to enhance LA teamwork skills, addressing the ongoing shift in Vietnam's educational landscape from teacher-led to more student-centered learning models (Nguyen, Marlina, & Cao, 2021). LA, a key concept in modern language education, emphasizes the learner's active role in managing their own learning journey (Little, 1995; Little, Dam, & Legenhausen, 2017). In the context of teamwork skills, autonomy extends beyond individual self-direction to include collaborative skills such as cooperation, communication, and joint decision-making (Lin & Lin, 2023; Martin, West, & Bill, 2008). The teacher's role in fostering this kind of autonomy is complex, requiring a nuanced approach that delicately balances guidance with freedom and direct instruction with learner-led exploration. Researchers have emphasized the significance of teacher roles in facilitating LA in EFL settings, noting the shift in pedagogical strategies necessary for successful implementation (Almusharraf, 2020; Saeed, 2021). The Vietnamese educational landscape offers a unique backdrop for this study. In the field of EFL education, where teacher-centric methodologies have historically predominated, there is an increasing movement towards approaches that prioritize student engagement and independence (Yen et al., 2023b). This shift is reflective of both local educational reforms and the global demand for proficient English language skills in a connected world. Studies such as those by Ryu and Nguyen (2021) and Nghia and Tran (2020) have underscored the challenges and opportunities inherent in this transition, particularly in the Vietnamese context.

This study centers on a singular yet comprehensive research question: What strategies do Vietnamese tertiary EFL teachers employ to enhance LA teamwork skills? By concentrating on this question, the research aims to shed light on the specific pedagogical methods and approaches used in the Vietnamese tertiary EFL context. The hypothesis guiding this investigation posits that innovative, learner-centered strategies employed by these teachers significantly contribute to the development of LA teamwork skills. This hypothesis is grounded in the premise that effective LA is fostered through methods that encourage active student engagement and collaborative learning (Chowdhury, 2021; Wang & Ryan, 2023). The novelty of this study lies in its focus on the Vietnamese tertiary EFL context, a relatively under-explored area in the field of language education research. It seeks to fill the gap in understanding how LA, specifically in teamwork skills, is being cultivated in environments transitioning from traditional teacher-centered methods to more modern, learner-centered approaches. The primary objective of this study is to meticulously document and analyze the strategies employed by Vietnamese tertiary EFL teachers, assess their effectiveness, and understand their impact on enhancing LA in teamwork skills. The findings are intended to contribute not only to the academic discourse on LA in language education but also to provide practical insights for educators striving to cultivate effective, autonomous teamworking skills among their learners. This, in turn, will provide valuable information for educators and policymakers to refine and implement more effective language teaching methodologies in similar contexts.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. LA in Language Education
LA is defined as the ability of learners to take charge of their own learning process. Holec (1979) first coined the term, emphasizing self-direction and responsibility in learning. Benson (2013) expanded this notion by including the ability to self-regulate one's learning process. In the context of language education, Little (1995) and Little et al. (2017) argued that autonomous learners are more effective, as they can apply learning strategies that best suit their individual needs.

2.2. Teamwork Skills in EFL Education
Teamwork skills in language learning are crucial for fostering communicative competence and collaborative skills. Oxford (1997) highlighted the role of cooperative learning in EFL classrooms, where students work together to achieve common goals, enhancing their language skills and intercultural competence. Kagan (1994) further supported this, noting that structured team-based activities could significantly improve language acquisition.

2.3. Strategies to Enhance LA
Various strategies have been identified to enhance LA. Little et al. (2017) emphasized the importance of creating a learning environment that encourages exploration and choice. Techniques such as self-assessment, goal-setting, and reflective learning practices have been shown to develop autonomous learning behaviors (Benson, 2013; Dickinson, 1995; Little, 2022).

2.4. Teacher's Role in Fostering Autonomy

The teacher's role in promoting autonomy is a balancing act between guidance and independence. Robinson and Persky (2020) described the teacher as a facilitator who creates opportunities for self-directed learning. Darling-Hammond and Bransford (2007) highlighted the need for teachers to be adaptable, shifting their roles as per the students' evolving needs.

2.5. LA in Vietnamese Tertiary EFL Education

New educational paradigms are challenging the traditional teacher-centered approach in Vietnam. Yen et al. (2023b) observed a gradual shift towards learner-centered methods in Vietnamese universities. However, Pham and Renshaw (2015) noted that this transition faces challenges due to cultural norms and institutional constraints.

2.6. Empirical Studies on Strategies in the Vietnamese Context

Empirical studies focusing on Vietnamese EFL settings have begun to emerge. Nguyen and Gu (2013) explored how Vietnamese teachers use group work and peer collaboration to foster language skills and autonomy. Vu and Shah (2016) investigated the use of technology in promoting self-directed learning among Vietnamese EFL learners.

In summary, the literature indicates a growing emphasis on LA in EFL education, with teamwork skills being a key component. The role of the teacher in facilitating this autonomy through various strategies is well-documented. However, there is a need for more focused research on the specific strategies employed in the Vietnamese tertiary context, an area this study aims to address.

3. METHODS

3.1. Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design, utilizing semi-structured interviews to delve into the strategies Vietnamese tertiary EFL teachers employ to enhance LA teamwork skills. The qualitative technique is suitable for this kind of research since it enables a thorough examination of the participants' viewpoints, experiences, and teaching methods. Semi-structured interviews provide the opportunity to go further into specific areas of interest while adhering to a standardized framework that guarantees consistency throughout the interviews.

The theoretical underpinnings of this study are primarily based on constructivist and sociocultural theories, both of which offer valuable insights into the processes of learning and teaching in the context of Vietnamese tertiary EFL education. Constructivist theory (CT), particularly as conceptualized by Vygotsky (1978) emphasizes that knowledge is not passively received but actively built by the learner through interaction with their environment and others. This theory aligns seamlessly with the study's focus on teamwork skills in EFL education, as it views learning as a fundamentally collaborative process. In an EFL classroom, this perspective highlights the role of social interaction and collaboration in language learning, suggesting that learners construct linguistic knowledge not in isolation but through engaging with peers and teachers. This approach is particularly relevant in exploring how teachers can facilitate environments that encourage learners to work together, share knowledge, and develop language skills in a group setting. Sociocultural theory (ST), which is also rooted in Vygotsky (1978) ideas, extends the constructivist approach by emphasizing the influence of cultural and social contexts on learning. This aspect of the theory is particularly pertinent in the Vietnamese context, where the educational landscape is undergoing a shift from traditional teacher-centered methods to more learner-centered approaches. The ST aids in comprehending how the broader cultural and social norms that are prevalent in Vietnam influence and interact with these evolving educational practices. By applying this theory, the study aims to examine how Vietnamese EFL teachers adapt their strategies to foster LA, taking into consideration the cultural norms, values, and expectations that influence both teaching and learning processes.

3.2. Research Population

The study focuses on a purposive sample of nine Vietnamese EFL teachers, drawn from two distinct educational institutions in Vietnam, to provide a diverse representation of teaching experiences and environments. The participants were strategically selected to encompass a range of career stages, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the strategies employed across different levels of teaching experience. This includes three novice teachers, who have recently embarked on their teaching; mid-career teachers, who have established a foothold in

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the profession and possess a moderate level of experience; and three near-end career teachers, who bring a wealth of knowledge and expertise from years in the field. Further details about the participants include their gender, educational backgrounds, and specific areas of teaching expertise within the EFL context. The group comprises five female and four male teachers, reflecting a gender balance in the profession. Their educational qualifications range from Master's degrees in English language teaching to Doctorate degrees in TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages). These teachers specialize in a variety of EFL areas, including general English, business English, and exam preparation courses, providing a rich tapestry of teaching contexts for the study.

The selection of participants from two different institutions aims to introduce a variety of educational contexts and teaching methodologies, thereby enriching the data with a broad spectrum of insights and experiences. This diversity is crucial for understanding the nuanced ways in which different institutional cultures and environments might influence the strategies employed to enhance LA team working skills.

This study places a strong emphasis on ethical practices in its research with human participants. It strictly follows ethical guidelines, securing informed consent from all involved, clarifying their rights, and ensuring confidentiality and anonymity. Personal data is safeguarded and used exclusively for research purposes. Additionally, the study implements strategies to mitigate any power imbalances between the researcher and participants, mindful of their professional positions and the sensitivity of disclosing teaching methods.

3.3. Data Collection Instrument

Data collection in this study primarily involved semi-structured interviews, selected for their balance of structure and openness. A pilot study with two EFL teachers not in the main study tested the interview questions for clarity and relevance, leading to revisions for better alignment with the research aims. The final questions aimed to probe teaching practices and challenges in promoting LA teamwork skills. Interviews, lasting 45 to 60 minutes, were conducted in quiet, private settings at participants' institutions, primarily in Vietnamese, to capture detailed and nuanced insights. English was an option for those who were more comfortable with it. To preserve data integrity, interviews were audio-recorded with consent, then transcribed verbatim and translated into English, ensuring fidelity to the original expressions and contexts. This comprehensive approach, from pilot testing to careful language consideration and meticulous transcription, underpinned the study's data quality and reliability.

3.4. Data Analysis

The semi-structured interview data were analyzed via thematic analysis, examining and reporting patterns within qualitative data (Braun, Clarke, & Hayfield, 2023). This method enabled an in-depth exploration of how Vietnamese EFL teachers foster LA teamwork skills. The analysis process entailed initial immersion in the transcripts to become familiar with the data, followed by systematic coding of data segments to summarize key contents. This iterative coding led to the emergence of potential themes, organically reflecting consistent patterns across interviews. Themes were refined through a meticulous review to ensure they accurately represented the dataset, concluding with a clear definition and naming of each theme to capture its essence. A reflexive stance was maintained throughout to acknowledge the researcher's biases and ensure the authenticity of the analysis.

4. FINDINGS

4.1. Facilitating Collaborative Learning Projects

Seven out of the nine participants—two novice teachers, three mid-career teachers, and two near-end teachers— mentioned facilitating collaborative learning projects. This finding suggests that facilitating collaborative learning projects is a widely adopted strategy across different career stages in the Vietnamese EFL context.

An excerpt from a novice teacher's interview illustrates this strategy: "*I encourage my students to engage in group projects where they have to plan and execute a small research project in English. This not only improves their language skills but also fosters a sense of responsibility and teamwork.*" This statement aligns with the CT, which emphasizes learning as an active, constructive process. The teacher's approach of involving students in research projects facilitates a learning environment where students actively construct knowledge through collaboration, embodying the essence of constructivist learning.

A mid-career teacher shared a similar perspective but with a nuanced understanding of the cultural context: "*In my classes, group projects are structured to consider the students' cultural background. I try to strike a balance between*

allowing autonomy and providing direction, which is crucial in our context where students are often hesitant to take initiative." This insight reflects the ST's emphasis on the role of cultural and social contexts in learning. The teacher's approach to structuring group projects acknowledges the influence of Vietnamese cultural norms on students' learning behaviors, and their strategy is adapted to navigate these norms to promote autonomy within a familiar and supportive framework.

A near-end teacher highlighted the long-term benefits of this strategy: "*Over the years, I have seen how group projects help students not only in improving their English but in developing skills like problem-solving and leadership, which they carry beyond the classroom.*" This reflects both the constructivist and sociocultural theories. From a constructivist perspective, the teacher recognizes the role of collaborative projects in enabling students to construct knowledge beyond linguistic skills. From a sociocultural standpoint, the emphasis on skills like leadership and problem-solving signifies an understanding of the broader social and cultural competencies that students need to develop.

4.2. Incorporating Reflective Practices

Six participants—one new teacher, three mid-career teachers, and two near-end teachers—highlighted the incorporation of reflective practices, demonstrating its relevance and applicability across various teaching career stages.

A novice teacher described his approach: "*I ask my students to maintain a reflective journal in English, where they write about their experiences in team projects. This not only helps in language practice but also in introspecting and understanding their own learning process.*" This practice aligns with the CT, as it encourages students to actively reflect on their learning experiences, thereby constructing personal understanding and knowledge. It also resonates with the ST by acknowledging that learning is a deeply personal process, influenced by individual experiences and cultural contexts.

A mid-career teacher shared a different perspective: "*In our reflective sessions, I encourage students to discuss not just their learning but also how they interact with their peers. This reflection helps them understand the dynamics of working in a team, which is crucial in our collective culture.*" This approach demonstrates an understanding of the ST, where the teacher recognizes the importance of social interaction and cultural norms in the learning process. The emphasis on peer interaction and teamwork reflects the teacher's adaptation of reflective practices to the sociocultural environment of the students.

From a near-end teacher's viewpoint: "*Over the years, I have integrated reflective discussions into my lessons. Students critically analyze their group work, discussing what worked and what did not. This fosters a deeper understanding and continuous improvement.*" This perspective combines elements of both theoretical frameworks. From a constructivist angle, it highlights how reflection leads to a deeper understanding and reconstruction of knowledge. Sociocultural refers to the role of group dynamics and collective learning in shaping individual learning experiences.

4.3. Utilizing Technology-Enhanced Learning

Five participants—two novice teachers, two mid-career teachers, and one near-end teacher—reported using technology-enhanced learning, indicating its growing importance in the Vietnamese EFL context at various stages of teaching careers.

One novice teacher described her use of technology: "*I integrate language learning apps and online platforms into my teaching. These tools not only make learning more engaging but also allow students to work collaboratively in virtual environments.*" This approach aligns with CT, where technology acts as an enabler for active and collaborative learning, allowing students to construct knowledge in an interactive digital environment. It also reflects ST by providing a space where social interactions and cultural exchanges can occur seamlessly in a virtual setting, transcending traditional classroom boundaries.

A mid-career teacher shared his perspective: "*Technology has been a game-changer. I use online forums and social media for group discussions and projects. It encourages shy students to participate more actively, which is important in our context where some students are reluctant to speak up in class.*" This statement demonstrates an application of ST, acknowledging the role of social dynamics and cultural nuances in learning. By leveraging technology, the

teacher is able to create a more inclusive and participative learning environment that caters to different student personalities and cultural behaviors.

From the viewpoint of a near-end teacher: "*Over my teaching career, I have seen technology evolve drastically. Now, I use it to facilitate real-time collaboration and communication among students, which prepares them for the globalized world they will enter.*" This reflects an integration of both constructivist and sociocultural theories. The constructivist aspect is evident in how technology facilitates active learning and knowledge construction. From a sociocultural perspective, the teacher recognizes the importance of preparing students for a globalized world, acknowledging the broader social and cultural implications of language learning.

4.4. Integrating Real-World Tasks

Eight participants, including all three novice teachers, two mid-career teachers, and three near-end teachers, indicated that integrating real-world tasks was a useful teaching strategy across various stages of teaching careers in the Vietnamese EFL context.

One of the novice teachers explained her approach: "*I design assignments that require students to interact in real-world situations, like conducting interviews or surveys in English. This approach not only improves their language skills but also enhances their practical teamwork abilities.*" This method is reflective of CT, where learning is viewed as an active process of engaging with real-world tasks, enabling students to construct knowledge through practical application. It also aligns with ST by situating learning within authentic social contexts, thus bridging classroom learning with real-life experiences.

A mid-career teacher shared his perspective: "*Integrating tasks that mirror real-life scenarios, like project management or event planning in English, helps students understand the practical relevance of what they learn. It is about making learning applicable to their lives.*" This approach demonstrates an understanding of ST, where learning is contextualized within real-life social situations, making it more meaningful and relevant to students. The constructivist element is evident in how students actively engage with and learn from real-world tasks, thereby constructing practical knowledge and skills.

A near-end teacher described his long-term observations: "*Over my career, I have consistently found that students learn best when they can see the real-world application of their skills. Tasks that mimic real-life situations help students to not only learn English but also develop essential life skills.*" This insight encapsulates both theoretical frameworks. From a constructivist viewpoint, it emphasizes the importance of experiential learning and knowledge construction through real-world engagement. Sociocultural, it highlights the significance of contextualizing learning in scenarios that students can relate to and engage with meaningfully.

5. DISCUSSION

The current study's findings on strategies employed by Vietnamese EFL teachers to enhance LA teamwork skills reveal both convergence and divergence with existing literature, thereby contributing novel insights to the field. The strategy of facilitating collaborative learning projects, highlighted by a majority of the study's participants, aligns with the emphasis on collaborative learning in existing literature (Kagan, 1994; Oxford, 1997; Qureshi, Khaskheli, Qureshi, Raza, & Yousufi, 2023; Sorbet & Notar, 2022). However, the mid-career teacher's nuanced adaptation of this strategy in the Vietnamese context, which balances autonomy and direction while taking cultural nuances into account, makes a unique contribution. This finding adds to what is already known by showing how collaborative learning can work well in a cultural setting where student initiative might not be as strong. This adds to the global conversation about collaborative learning in different cultural settings. Similarly, the incorporation of reflective practices resonates with previous studies emphasizing reflective learning for language development (Benson, 2013; Cooke, 2013; Farrell, 2020). The insights from the novice and near-end teachers in this study underscore the role of reflection in not only language acquisition but also in understanding team dynamics and continuous self-improvement. This dual focus on language and interpersonal skills through reflection offers a new perspective to the literature, emphasizing the multifaceted benefits of reflective practices in EFL education.

The use of technology-enhanced learning is another area where this study adds to existing knowledge. While the integration of technology in language teaching is well documented (Başar & Şahin, 2021; Cheung, 2023; Taghizadeh & Hasani Yourdshahi, 2020) the current study highlights how technology facilitates not only language learning but also collaborative and inclusive learning experiences, as noted by the mid-career teacher. This finding is particularly

relevant in the context of shy students in Vietnamese classrooms, showcasing how technology can be a powerful tool to engage all learners, thus addressing the sociocultural challenges specific to this context (Bui, Hoang, & Nguyen, 2022; Huynh & Adams, 2022). Lastly, the strategy of incorporating real-world tasks, which was pushed by participants at all stages of their careers, fits with constructivist and sociocultural theories that support learning through experience (Vygotsky, 1978). The unique contribution of this study lies in its demonstration of how real-world tasks are adapted to the Vietnamese cultural and educational setting. The insights from teachers highlight how such tasks are not only language learning exercises but also avenues for developing essential life skills, contextualizing EFL learning in a way that is directly relevant to students' lives.

6. CONCLUSION

This study embarked on an exploration of the strategies employed by Vietnamese tertiary EFL teachers to enhance LA teamwork skills, set against the backdrop of a shifting educational landscape in Vietnam. Drawing from a qualitative research design, the study utilized semi-structured interviews with nine teachers at various stages of their careers across two educational institutions. This approach allowed for an in-depth understanding of the teachers' perspectives and practices. Thematic analysis of the data, guided by constructivist and sociocultural theoretical frameworks, provided a nuanced interpretation of the findings. The study revealed several key strategies: facilitating collaborative learning projects, incorporating reflective practices, utilizing technology-enhanced learning, and integrating real-world tasks. These strategies were reported across different career stages, indicating a widespread recognition of their importance in the Vietnamese EFL context. The findings showed not only an alignment with constructivist and sociocultural theories but also provided unique insights into how these strategies are adapted in the Vietnamese educational setting, taking into account cultural nuances and the evolving educational paradigm.

The implications of these findings are significant for the field of EFL education. Firstly, they underscore the importance of contextually relevant teaching strategies that consider the cultural and educational backgrounds of learners. The adaption of collaborative and reflective practices in a way that resonates with Vietnamese students suggests a need for educators in similar contexts to tailor their approaches accordingly. Secondly, the study highlights the growing role of technology in facilitating inclusive and collaborative learning environments, suggesting that EFL educators should consider integrating digital tools to enhance student engagement and participation. Lastly, the emphasis on real-world tasks points to the value of experiential learning in EFL education, encouraging educators to design learning experiences that extend beyond the classroom and are directly applicable to students' lives.

In conclusion, this study contributes to the broader discourse on EFL education by highlighting how LA teamwork skills can be effectively cultivated through context-specific strategies. It offers valuable insights for EFL educators, curriculum designers, and policymakers, particularly in non-native English-speaking contexts, underscoring the need for culturally sensitive and adaptable teaching methodologies. As the educational landscape continues to evolve, the findings of this study provide a foundation for further research and practice aimed at enhancing the efficacy of EFL teaching and learning.

7. LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER STUDIES

The study, while providing valuable insights into the strategies employed by Vietnamese tertiary EFL teachers, is not without its limitations. One of the primary constraints is the relatively small sample size of nine participants from only two educational institutions. This limitation restricts the generalizability of the findings to the wider population of EFL teachers in Vietnam or other similar contexts. Additionally, the study solely relied on qualitative data obtained through semi-structured interviews, which, although rich in detail, might be influenced by the subjective perceptions of the participants and the researcher. There is also the potential for language translation issues to impact the nuances of the responses, especially in the context of complex educational concepts. Furthermore, the study's focus on specific career stages, while insightful, does not account for other factors that might influence teaching strategies, such as institutional policies, resources, or student demographics.

Given these limitations, future research in this area could be expanded in several ways. A larger-scale study involving a greater number of participants from a wider range of educational institutions across different regions of Vietnam would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the strategies used by EFL teachers. Additionally, incorporating a mixed-methods approach that combines qualitative and quantitative data could offer a more robust analysis and help validate the findings. Further research could also explore the impact of institutional factors and

resources on the implementation of these strategies, as well as the perspectives and experiences of the learners themselves, to provide a more holistic view of the EFL learning environment. Finally, comparative studies involving EFL teachers in different cultural or educational contexts could offer valuable cross-cultural insights and contribute to a more global understanding of effective strategies for enhancing LA teamwork skills.

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INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD STATEMENT
The Ethical Committee of the Can Tho University, Vietnam has granted approval for this study on 4 January 2023 (Ref. No. 10).

TRANSPARENCY
The authors confirm that the manuscript is an honest, accurate, and transparent account of the study; that no vital features of the study have been omitted; and that any discrepancies from the study as planned have been explained. This study followed all ethical practices during writing.

COMPETING INTERESTS
The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS
Both authors contributed equally to the conception and design of the study. Both authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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