

English and French-major students' suggestions on extracurricular activities for English learning: A case in the Mekong Delta

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: Extracurricular activities (ECA) are encouraged by education stakeholders in Vietnam to contribute to improving the English ability of Vietnamese people. At universities, ECA is organized quite a lot, but there is a lack of consultation from students. Therefore, this study aimed to investigate the English and French majors' preferred ECA for English learning.

Design/Methodology/Approach: This study involved 151 students from two groups of students majoring in foreign languages, English and French. A questionnaire was used to gather the students' perspectives on how to implement ECA for English language learning.

Findings: The results showed that most students favored experiential travel to places where English is used frequently to help them improve their oral skills. However, the students were not interested in multi-day activities, mandatory-participation policies, individual activities, or online-organized events.

Conclusion: The research results suggest ideas for organizing ECA for English learning for students majoring in French and English.

Practical implications: The research team proposed a specific tourism simulation activity in this paper based on the results, which can be a useable source for further ECA for English learning organized in the context of higher education institutions in Vietnam and elsewhere.

Limitations: This study focused on students majoring in foreign languages, so its applicability to non-foreign language-major students is limited. Further studies in this field should focus on gathering perspectives from non-foreign-language majors.

Contribution to literature: The literature on ECA for English learning has not yet received adequate attention. Therefore, this study contributes to the relevant literature and suggests significant topics for future research.

Keywords: *English learning, Extracurricular activities, English-major students, French-major students, Suggestions, Mekong Delta.*

1. INTRODUCTION

It is crucial for Vietnamese people to develop their English competencies because of globalization and internationalization. As a member of some international communities, such as the World Trade Organization (WTO) or Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation, Vietnam can benefit from the development opportunities, but this also requires its people to have sufficient skills and knowledge to compete with others beyond their country's borders. Consequently, many plans and projects aim to develop Vietnamese people's competencies. One significant project is Project 2020, which encourages educational institutions in Vietnam to use extra-curricular activities (ECA) to develop university students' English competencies.

Regarding the use of ECA for English learning, it is expected to provide the students with more opportunities to foster their abilities to use English in real-world communication. Additionally, numerous studies have shown the value of ECA in improving student learning outcomes (e.g., (Kirkpatrick, 2012; Nguyen, 2019; Zakhir, 2019)). However, most of these studies focus only on identifying or evaluating the impact of ECA on students' English learning. Therefore, understanding what kind of ECA students are interested in participating has been overlooked, even though it can significantly impact the quality of the ECA. Consequently, this study aimed to determine what type of ECA students prefer, where it is organized, when it is organized, or related issues. More specifically, this study

involves both English-major students and those majoring in French. In Vietnam, in addition to English as an obligatory foreign language, French is also a language that many educational institutions use to teach their students. For majors in French, such as French Studies or French Education, students are required to study English as a foreign language to complete their degree program. Therefore, understanding what kind of ECA they wish to participate in will help them learn English more effectively.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

It is not easy to define an ECA precisely because most scholars and researchers use specific examples to describe it. In the research of [Lariviere \(2016\)](#), ECA includes academic competitions, on-stage performances, social fraternity, and so on. Therefore, having many types of ECA makes it more challenging to define an ECA cluster. However, the easiest way to talk about ECA is that the ECA is organized to help students supplement the necessary knowledge that is difficult for students to acquire during classroom learning ([Bartkus, Nemelka, Nemelka, & Gardner, 2012](#)).

The positive impact of ECA on language learning has been demonstrated by previous studies (e.g., ([Holt, Sehn, Spence, Newton, & Ball, 2012](#); [Simoncini, Caltabiano, & Lasen, 2012](#))). Notably, [Simoncini et al. \(2012\)](#) claim that participating in ECA helps students explore who they are and what they are good at, while, [Holt et al. \(2012\)](#) determined the positive impact of ECA on students' maturity, self-confidence, intelligence, and morality. Furthermore, ECA is expected to help students relax after hard-working days with their heavy schedules ([Cabansag, 2022](#); [Metsäpelto & Pulkkinen, 2014](#)).

With specific examples as above, ECA refers to activities outside class time organized to provide and supplement students with the necessary knowledge and skills they can hardly be learnt in class. Therefore, an ECA for English language teaching and learning is essential for students majoring in French as they need additional knowledge and skills to fulfill their English language requirements in a university program.

There have been several studies in this field. To explore the impact of the English Club as a specific ECA on students' development in their learning outcomes, [Harisiswana \(2017\)](#) conducted a case study with 11 students to explore the impact of the English Club as a specific ECA on students' development in their learning outcomes. The qualitative data from in-depth interviews showed that English Club significantly developed the students' knowledge and skills. [Kirkpatrick \(2012\)](#) attempted to measure the effectiveness of ECA on Thai students' learning outcomes through another case study involving different stakeholders, such as students, staff members, teacher assistants, and administrators. The study found many remarkable results, with students expressing little interest in the ECA they had at the time since it took up much of their time. They suggested that ECA organizers employ a need analysis in order to figure out their preferences for ECA. Although the results indicated students' negative attitudes towards ECA, they recognized the potential of ECA and would like to participate in the future, particularly in ECA that meet their interests.

[Nguyen \(2019\)](#) conducted a study in the Vietnamese context with the participation of 3000 university students. The primary aim of the study was to investigate what the students need to help increase the effectiveness of ECA in their learning. Using a questionnaire and interviews to collect data, Nguyen found that the students would love to participate in ECA because they believed that it would develop their communication skills as well as English skills. Moreover, the data indicated the students' preferences for short-term ECA over long-term ones.

The above-mentioned studies have contributed to enriching the literature related to ECA. The studies by [Harisiswana \(2017\)](#) and [Kirkpatrick \(2012\)](#) focused on fostering an understanding of the impact of ECA on students' learning. More specially, [Nguyen \(2019\)](#) did a fantastic job exploring the types of ECA that students prefer to participate in. However, there is more work to be done to enhance the impact of ECA on students' learning, particularly in English learning. One way to address this is to explore how students believe ECA should be organized in terms of types of ECA, timing, location, frequency, and other factors. Therefore, this study was conducted to answer the questions.

3. METHOD

The current study employed a quantitative design, using a questionnaire to collect data. This approach allowed the findings to be generalized and helped foster understanding of how to organize ECA for both English-major and French-major students. A total of 151 participants took part in this study including 126 English-major students and 25 French-major students. In Vietnam, the demand for English majors is higher than that for French majors, which is reflected in the number of enrollments of this study.

To collect data, a self-developed questionnaire with 76 items was used to fulfill the research aims. The questionnaire allowed the respondents to choose one among five options: “Strongly disagree,” “Disagree,” “Neutral,” “Agree,” and “Strongly disagree.” The items were divided into 10 clusters, each aiming to explore a particular idea for organizing ECA for English learning. For instance, the first cluster consisted of 20 items that aimed to explore the types of ECA the students would like to participate in, were collected from the previous studies (e.g., (Harisiswana, 2017; Kirkpatrick, 2012; Nguyen, 2019; Zakhir, 2019). Similarly, other questions aimed to answer to questions such as “Where?”, “When?”, “How often?” and so on.

The research team used Google Forms to deliver the questionnaire to the participants. Before the actual questionnaire was used, it was piloted with fifty students who had some experience in organizing ECA. The first purpose of the selection of the pilot participants was to check the reliability of the instrument. By using a Scale test, the questionnaire was approved to be reliable for further research steps ($\alpha=.92$). The second purpose was to enhance the validity of the instrument. The research team get feedback from those who had experience organizing ECA to ensure the items were clear and valuable. Their experience contributed to the validity of the instrument by adding appropriate ideas and deleting inappropriate ones. As a result, the reliability and validity of the instrument were ensured. After the pilot study was completed, the research team sent the questionnaire to the participants with a consent letter. The authors provided all of the useful information for the participants to consider whether or not they should respond to the questionnaire. This was expected to increase the participants’ willingness to participate in the study.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The following tables display the test results used to compare how English-major students suggested organizing ECA for English learning and how French-major students recommended it.

Table 1. The comparison between English majors’ and French majors’ preferable types of ECA.

Items	Participants	N	Mean	SD	SEM	p
Singing contest in English/French	English majors	126	3.52	1.002	0.089	0.57
	French majors	25	3.64	0.995	0.199	
Role-plays	English majors	126	3.25	0.944	0.084	0.25
	French majors	25	3.48	0.823	0.165	
Composing poetry in English/French	English majors	126	2.99	0.967	0.086	0.82
	French majors	25	3.04	0.935	0.187	
Composing English/French short stories	English majors	126	3.15	0.947	0.084	0.30
	French majors	25	3.36	0.810	0.162	
Composing English/French songs	English majors	126	3.00	1.035	0.092	0.19
	French majors	25	3.28	0.936	0.187	
Photo contest with photo description in English/French	English majors	126	3.71	1.044	0.093	0.81
	French majors	25	3.76	0.779	0.156	
English/French Magazines design	English majors	126	3.57	0.983	0.088	0.89
	French majors	25	3.60	0.816	0.163	
Debate in English/French	English majors	126	3.51	0.994	0.089	0.29
	French majors	25	3.28	0.843	0.169	
Quiz about culture and customs of English/French speaking countries	English majors	126	3.77	0.997	0.089	0.74
	French majors	25	3.84	0.688	0.138	
Presentation on Vietnam tourism in English/French	English majors	126	3.79	0.926	0.083	0.59
	French majors	25	3.68	0.748	0.150	
Presentation on local culture in English/French	English majors	126	3.69	0.862	0.077	0.78
	French majors	25	3.64	0.700	0.140	
Watching movies with late-discussions	English majors	126	3.83	0.978	0.087	0.87
	French majors	25	3.80	0.764	0.153	
Outdoor activities using English/French	English majors	126	3.94	0.906	0.081	0.90
	French majors	25	3.92	0.812	0.162	

Items	Participants	N	Mean	SD	SEM	p
Big event including lots of different activities in English/French	English majors	126	3.80	0.849	0.076	0.99
	French majors	25	3.80	0.764	0.153	
Cultural Festival of English/French speaking countries	English majors	126	3.94	0.936	0.083	0.78
	French majors	25	3.88	0.726	0.145	
English/French speaking clubs	English majors	126	3.71	0.930	0.083	0.64
	French majors	25	3.80	0.764	0.153	
English/French exam preparation clubs	English majors	126	3.79	0.861	0.077	0.97
	French majors	25	3.80	0.816	0.163	
Book café (Drinks, books, and discussions)	English majors	126	3.97	0.912	0.081	0.40
	French majors	25	3.80	0.866	0.173	
Foreign language corner	English majors	126	3.83	0.913	0.081	0.46
	French majors	25	3.68	0.802	0.160	
Traveling to experience English cultures	English majors	126	4.11	0.982	0.087	0.59
	French majors	25	4.00	0.764	0.153	

Based on the results presented in Table 1, there were no significant differences between the preferred types of extracurricular activities (ECA) among English-major and French major students ($p > .05$). It is evident that the foreign language students in this study shared similar needs and desires to participate in ECA, and among them, participating in cultural experiences through travel was the most anticipated activity. The results show that the students perceived exposure to English-speaking cultures as a useful way to improve their language skills, which is supported by the previous research. According to Wahyuningsih and Afandi (2020), the lack of an English-speaking environment has a negative effect on language learners while Al Zoubi (2018) suggested that increasing exposure to the culture of English-speaking countries would help learners learn better and more effectively.

Table 2. The comparison between English majors' and French majors' preferable frequency for organizing ECA.

Items	Participants	N	Mean	SD	SEM	p
Weekly	English majors	126	3.01	1.039	0.093	0.39
	French majors	25	3.20	0.913	0.183	
Monthly	English majors	126	3.59	0.998	0.089	0.24
	French majors	25	3.84	0.898	0.180	
Once a semester	English majors	126	3.44	1.008	0.090	0.20
	French majors	25	3.72	0.980	0.196	
Twice a semester	English majors	126	3.41	1.037	0.092	0.82
	French majors	25	3.36	1.114	0.223	
Once a year	English majors	126	3.12	1.093	0.097	0.87
	French majors	25	3.08	0.909	0.182	

According to the results obtained and presented in Table 2, there was no significant difference related to the desire for the frequency of ECA according to the opinion of the students ($p > .05$). Both English and French majors expressed a preference for monthly ECA events. This result is quite interesting because university students in Vietnam are known as those having a very tight schedule, making it difficult for them to arrange to participate in programs outside of regular school hours (Trang & Baldauf, 2007). However, in this study, the foreign language students suggested organizing ECA monthly, which equates to 12 times per year.

This result suggests a strong desire for ECA among the students, potentially driven by a need for stress relief after demanding classes. According to Metsäpelto and Pulkkinen (2014), ECA not only positively impacts the quality of student learning but also helps students have time for fun and entertainment. Consequently, stress and fatigue are somewhat reduced.

Table 3. The comparison between English majors' and French majors' preferable time for organizing ECA.

Items	Participants	N	Mean	SD	SEM	P
Weekends	English majors	126	3.65	1.127	0.100	0.35
	French majors	25	3.88	1.054	0.211	
At the beginning of the semester	English majors	126	3.37	1.078	0.096	0.16
	French majors	25	3.08	0.862	0.172	
In the mid-semester	English majors	126	3.04	0.975	0.087	0.57
	French majors	25	3.16	0.850	0.170	
At the end of the semester	English majors	126	3.01	1.016	0.090	0.37
	French majors	25	3.20	0.957	0.191	
Summer time	English majors	126	3.59	1.147	0.102	0.39
	French majors	25	3.80	1.041	0.208	
Holidays	English majors	126	2.63	1.121	0.100	0.61
	French majors	25	2.76	1.128	0.226	

Regarding the time to organize ECA, both groups of students had almost the same opinion, as there was no noticeable difference through the results presented in Table 3 ($p > .05$). Specifically, both groups of students agreed that the most appropriate time to organize ECAs is the weekends. Compared to other times, the weekend is probably the easiest time for students to arrange to participate in ECA. Conversely, holidays were considered the least suitable time for ECA, as the students often use this time to spend or take vacations (McLeod, Dieu, & Nguyen, 2001). On the other hand, for non-specific times in the primary semesters, such as the beginning, middle, and end, it would be difficult for the students to arrange their schedules and participate in ECA because each student's schedule could be different from the others due to the different regulations of the credit system in some universities in Vietnam.

Table 4. The comparison between English majors' and French majors' preferable place for organizing ECA.

Items	Participants	N	Mean	SD	SEM	P
In the classroom	English majors	126	3.29	1.036	0.092	0.34
	French majors	25	3.12	0.781	0.156	
Outside the classroom - on the campus of the university	English majors	126	3.90	0.902	0.080	0.74
	French majors	25	3.96	0.735	0.147	
Out of university's campus but in the city center	English majors	126	3.82	0.933	0.083	0.91
	French majors	25	3.84	0.746	0.149	
The suburban areas	English majors	126	3.53	1.205	0.107	0.56
	French majors	25	3.68	0.945	0.189	
Out of the city	English majors	126	3.60	1.234	0.110	0.63
	French majors	25	3.72	0.936	0.187	

Regarding the venue of the ECA presented in Table 4, both groups once again agreed on the same point of view ($p > .05$). Specifically, they would like the ECA venue to be outside the classroom but still on the university campus. The students expressed a strong desire to avoid participating in ECA in the classroom since they spend much of their time there and prefer a change of environment (Khan, 2016). Moreover, the students did not need to leave the campus to engage in ECA. This may be due to the fact that the research site has a beautiful and well-maintained campus, which has been reviewed positively by local journals specializing in reviewing beautiful landscapes in the Mekong Delta, making it a desirable location to spend leisure time (e.g., saostar.vn).

Table 5 displays the comparison between English majors' and French majors' preferable length for organizing ECA. As for the length of an ECA that students wanted to participate in, there was no statistically significant difference ($p > .05$), the mean scores of the two groups of students were slightly different. Specifically, English majors preferred to participate in ECA held in a single session (the morning, the afternoon, or the evening), while those majoring in French preferred the ECA to be held for a full day the most. Although the above differences are mentioned, the common point is that both groups of students wanted to avoid ECA being held for many days. As mentioned, the regular schedule of students in Vietnam is hefty (Trang & Baldauf, 2007). Therefore, attending an event for too long

would make it difficult for students to participate. Consequently, they preferred to participate in short-term ECA rather than long-term ones.

Table 5. The comparison between English majors' and French majors' preferable length for organizing ECA.

Items	Participants	N	Mean	SD	SEM	P
A/an morning/afternoon/evening	English majors	126	3.53	0.935	0.083	0.80
	French majors	25	3.48	0.918	0.184	
A day	English majors	126	3.52	1.010	0.090	0.49
	French majors	25	3.68	1.069	0.214	
Some days	English majors	126	3.33	1.145	0.102	0.44
	French majors	25	3.52	0.918	0.184	
A week	English majors	126	3.00	1.193	0.106	0.16
	French majors	25	3.36	0.952	0.190	

Table 6. The comparison between English majors' and French majors' preferable skills to develop by participating in ECA.

Items	Participants	N	Mean	SD	SEM	P
Listening	English majors	126	4.33	0.725	0.065	0.63
	French majors	25	4.40	0.645	0.129	
Speaking	English majors	126	4.39	0.737	0.066	0.67
	French majors	25	4.32	0.690	0.138	
Reading	English majors	126	4.05	0.838	0.075	0.79
	French majors	25	4.00	0.707	0.141	
Writing	English majors	126	4.01	0.863	0.077	0.86
	French majors	25	4.04	0.676	0.135	
Pronunciation	English majors	126	4.27	0.753	0.067	0.36
	French majors	25	4.12	0.726	0.145	
Grammatical knowledge	English majors	126	4.07	0.831	0.074	0.86
	French majors	25	4.04	0.735	0.147	
Lexicon knowledge	English majors	126	4.29	0.738	0.066	0.93
	French majors	25	4.28	0.737	0.147	

The results in Table 6 show that the need to learn language skills and knowledge through participating in ECA of students of two majors is quite similar ($p > .05$). However, the students majoring in English showed greater interest in developing speaking skills, while those majoring in French were particularly interested in improving their listening skills. Nonetheless, both groups of students focused on oral skills when participating in ECA.

Although there have been many reforms to develop students' listening and speaking skills in Vietnamese education (Thao & Mai, 2022), the focus on reading, writing, grammar, and vocabulary skills still exists. Although these subjects are separated into different modules at the higher education level, the influence of general education persists. Therefore, Vietnamese students often lack confidence in their listening and speaking skills (Vo, Pham, & Ho, 2018). By participating in ECA, the students expressed a strong desire to take advantage of more opportunities and time to develop their oral skills.

Table 7. The comparison between English majors' and French majors' preferable prizes when participating in ECA.

Items	Participants	N	Mean	SD	SEM	P
Monetary prizes	English majors	126	4.03	0.867	0.077	0.87
	French majors	25	4.00	0.816	0.163	
Awards in the form of presents/ gifts	English majors	126	4.13	0.820	0.073	0.62
	French majors	25	4.04	0.676	0.135	
Extra points for personal training section	English majors	126	4.17	0.919	0.082	0.86
	French majors	25	4.20	0.707	0.141	
Extra points for the foreign language courses	English majors	126	4.02	1.023	0.091	0.43
	French majors	25	4.20	0.913	0.183	

The results presented in Table 7 show that there was no significant difference in the desire for awards among the two groups of students when participating in the ECA ($p>.05$). In Vietnam's rating scale, in addition to academic-related scores, students are also assessed for their learning attitudes, sense of responsibility, and dedication through "Diem ren luyen" or "Points for Personal Training Section." This score does not describe whether the student is performing well or not but focuses on assessing their moral character. In Vietnam, there is a common saying "Study manners first, then read and write," which emphasizes the importance of developing virtuous character before acquiring knowledge. Therefore, moral values are always considered an essential measure of success and failure of Vietnamese individuals (Trung & Van, 2020). Instead of receiving monetary awards or other material incentives, the students desire to be recognized for their participation through "Diem ren luyen" highlights the significance of moral values in Vietnamese culture.

Table 8. The comparison between English majors' and French majors' preferable types of participation.

Items	Participants	N	Mean	SD	SEM	P
Voluntary participation	English majors	126	4.27	0.784	0.070	0.86
	French majors	25	4.24	0.723	0.145	
Mandatory participation	English majors	126	2.63	1.129	0.101	0.18
	French majors	25	2.96	1.172	0.234	
Face-to-face participation	English majors	126	3.87	0.885	0.079	0.27
	French majors	25	4.08	0.702	0.140	
Online participation	English majors	126	3.10	1.137	0.101	0.93
	French majors	25	3.08	1.038	0.208	
Off-and-online combination	English majors	126	3.44	1.149	0.102	0.62
	French majors	25	3.32	1.069	0.214	
Individual participation	English majors	126	3.67	0.938	0.084	0.26
	French majors	25	3.44	0.821	0.164	
Group participation	English majors	126	3.92	0.854	0.076	0.40
	French majors	25	3.76	0.970	0.194	

The results of Table 8 once again confirm that the difference in expectations of how ECA is organized is negligible between the two groups of foreign language students ($p>.05$). Firstly, both groups of students agreed that their participation in ECA should be completely voluntary and not compulsory. This is understandable as no one really likes being forced to do something, even though it is a highly moral job like volunteering (Clary & Snyder, 1999). They would feel more comfortable and enthusiastic if they participated voluntarily rather than being forced to do so. Secondly, both groups of students expected to participate in ECA when the event was completely face-to-face instead of a combination of online and offline or entirely online. The emergence of online learning is due to the development of technology and is considered a significant step forward in education (Raja & Nagasubramani, 2018). However, learning English through face-to-face communication makes students more interested in learning (Lee, Leung, Lo, Xiong, & Wu, 2011). In particular, the results of the study mentioned above have also confirmed that students wanted to develop oral skills the most. Therefore, both groups of students supported the idea of organizing ECA entirely offline. Finally, students were more interested in participating in ECA with their groups than in individual activities. Joining a group of close friends would help students have more excitement than doing it alone (Burdett, 2003). However, this result also shows that students lack independence, as demonstrated by Nguyen and Mcinnis (2002) in their study in Vietnam.

5. CONCLUSION

This study aimed to determine the opinions of foreign language-major students regarding the organization of ECA for English language learning. Specifically, 126 English majors and 25 French majors studying at a university in the Mekong Delta agreed to participate in the study. The results obtained from the survey of the two groups of students show that although they were studying two foreign languages, their opinions on organizing ECA for English learning were relatively similar. Specifically, the students would like to learn English through experiential travel to places where English is spoken, and at the same time, they would explore more about the culture there. They also indicated a desire to participate in ECA regularly, with one event per month. However, they preferred short-term events rather

than those that lasted for many days. Interestingly, although they wanted to travel to places with cultures of English-speaking countries, they chose to participate in ECA on campus. In addition, both groups of students agreed about the award of participating in ECA, the policies of ECA (voluntary, group work, and face-to-face), and the goal of participating in ECA (developing oral skills).

Through the results, the research team proposes an idea related to organizing ECAs for English language learning for students majoring in foreign languages at universities in Vietnam and schools in the region of Southeast Asia. Firstly, although most students like to participate in experiential tourism, the conditions and expectations about the time or place to organize or the way to organize a trip do not seem to be feasible. Therefore, a tourist simulated event can be implemented. Specifically, in case universities have large campuses with many different buildings, it is very convenient to simulate each building as a country or a certain place. In those buildings, students will experience the simulated works displayed by the organizers. Along with that, groups of students who are good at English volunteering to join the organizing team will be able to act as tour guides or curators, presenting about the cultural beauty and typical features of each place. Moreover, while on tour, students will participate in quizzes to help them practice their listening and speaking skills as they have expected. In addition to consolation prizes in each building, students who register to participate in the event will receive a “Diem ren luyen” bonus. Based on the above plan, universities can completely organize the event on a single weekend without extending the time for many days, affecting the concentration of students on their official learning. However, the event organizers must prepare many tools and content for this plan. Besides, this event will only be possible once a year for new students because, for those who have already participated, the content will not be novel to them, and as a result, it may cause boredom. This study was conducted with the participation of students majoring in foreign languages, so applying for non-foreign language-major students may be not practical. Therefore, future studies need the involvement of students from non-foreign language majors. Additionally, using only a questionnaire to survey may not provide in-depth data. Therefore, in-depth interviews should be conducted later.

FUNDING

This study received no specific financial support.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received: 22 December 2022/ Revised: 8 February 2023/ Accepted: 24 February 2023/ Published: 27 March 2023

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

Both authors contributed equally to the conception and design of the study.

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