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EDITED BY

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REVIEWED BY

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Eastern Mediterranean University, Türkiye
Eunjeong Park,
Sunchon National University, Republic
of Korea

*CORRESPONDENCE

Baso Jabu
✉ amrim4592@gmail.com

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Flipped learning and its challenges: understanding students' struggles in Indonesian EFL contexts from teachers' viewpoint

Reski Pilu¹, Baso Jabu^{2*} and Iskandar Sulaiman²

¹Doctoral Student at Postgraduate Program, Universitas Negeri Makassar, Makassar, Indonesia,

²Department of English, Faculty of Languages and Literature, Universitas Negeri Makassar, Makassar, Indonesia

This study examines the challenges students face in flipped learning in Indonesian English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms from teachers' perspectives. Flipped learning shifts content delivery outside the classroom and prioritizes active learning in class, but its implementation presents difficulties, particularly in EFL settings. Fifteen experienced teachers from one of the private university's English Study Programs in South Sulawesi, Indonesia, were interviewed. Thematic analysis identified key student challenges, including difficulties with time management and self-regulation, unequal access to technology and reliable internet, reluctance to participate actively in class, struggles with independent content comprehension, and challenges in adapting to the demands of the flipped model. Some students also experienced feelings of isolation due to reduced social interaction. These findings underscore the importance of educators providing explicit self-regulation strategies, ensuring equitable access to technology, fostering interactive classroom environments, and designing collaborative activities that promote student engagement. This study offers practical insights for improving flipped learning in EFL classrooms.

KEYWORDS

flipped learning, EFL, Indonesia, student challenges, teacher perspectives

Introduction

Flipped learning shifts content delivery outside the classroom, utilizing class time for active learning (Misnawati, 2023; Pilu and Nur, 2023). This approach fosters student engagement, promotes deeper understanding, and enhances the development of critical thinking and collaboration skills (Keengve et al., 2014; Turan and Akdag-Cimen, 2020). In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education, flipped classrooms have been explored to improve reading comprehension, oral communication, and vocabulary acquisition (Fahmi et al., 2020; Fischer and Yang, 2022; Fulgueras and Bautista, 2020; Kaliappan and Mohamad, 2023; Lertcharoenwanich and Soontornwipast, 2024; Retnaningsih et al., 2022). By allowing students to learn at their own pace and engage in interactive tasks during class, this method accommodates diverse learning styles and fosters learner autonomy (Misnawati and Anwar, 2024).

However, implementing flipped learning in Indonesia poses significant challenges. Socioeconomic disparities result in unequal access to digital devices and reliable internet, limiting student participation in pre-class activities (Persky and Hogg, 2017; Wikanta et al., 2023). Additionally, the dominant culture of passive learning in Indonesian classrooms

may hinder students' readiness for self-directed, active learning (Cafferty, 2020; Kartika et al., 2018; Subiyantoro, 2023). Teacher preparedness and access to high-quality digital materials also affect implementation success.

While prior studies have examined general obstacles in flipped learning (Akçayir and Akçayir, 2018; Turan and Akdag-Cimen, 2020; Tütüncü and Aksu, 2018), there is a lack of research addressing the specific challenges faced by Indonesian English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students. This study aims to fill that gap by exploring teachers' perspectives on the challenges students face during the implementation of the flipped classroom. The insights gained can inform instructional design, teacher training, and support strategies for more effective flipped learning practices in EFL contexts.

Research question

What challenges do students face when implementing flipped learning in Indonesian EFL classrooms?

Flipped classroom model

The flipped classroom reverses the traditional model by assigning content review outside class and focusing on active learning during class (Egbert et al., 2014; Sengul and Bostanci, 2021). It promotes learner autonomy and deeper engagement through the use of pre-recorded videos, digital readings, and in-class discussions (Fischer and Yang, 2022).

In EFL education, flipped models have been shown to enhance vocabulary retention, communication skills, and content comprehension (Keengve et al., 2014; Misnawati and Anwar, 2024). The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the adoption of this approach, highlighting its value for digital literacy and pedagogical flexibility (Birgili et al., 2021; Bond, 2020; Hao et al., 2024; Köpeczi-Bócz, 2024). Research post-2020 also emphasizes integration with microlearning and mobile-assisted language learning to support learners' needs in digital settings (Bouguebs, 2024; Oden, 2024; Portillo Rodríguez et al., 2024; Yang et al., 2025).

Effective in-class activities remain central to the success of flipped learning. Simply moving lectures online is not sufficient; students must be meaningfully engaged through collaboration, problem-solving, and critical thinking tasks (Chen et al., 2014; Heo and Chun, 2018; Sengul and Bostanci, 2021). Teachers play a pivotal role in designing these activities and supporting students' transition from passive recipients to active participants (Arslan, 2020). However, the shift in instructional roles requires ongoing teacher development and institutional readiness (Du, 2020; Wikanta et al., 2023).

This study contributes to the literature by contextualizing these theoretical perspectives within the Indonesian EFL setting, with a focus on teacher experiences in guiding students through flipped learning amid structural and cultural constraints.

Methods

This study employed a qualitative exploratory design to investigate teachers' perspectives on the challenges students face while engaging with flipped learning in Indonesian EFL classrooms. This approach is well-suited for exploring phenomena that are not yet fully understood and where in-depth insight is needed from those with direct experience. It enables the researcher to uncover patterns, perceptions, and contextual understandings without being constrained by predetermined hypotheses or rigid variables. The exploratory nature of the study allowed for a flexible and open-ended inquiry into how flipped learning is implemented and experienced in an Indonesian university setting, particularly through the lens of EFL lecturers.

A qualitative exploratory design was chosen because it facilitates the collection of rich, descriptive data, emphasizing meaning-making, and interpretation over measurement. This design aligns with the study's objective to gain a nuanced understanding of the challenges encountered by students, as observed and interpreted by their instructors. The design also supports inductive analysis, where themes and insights emerge from the participants' responses, guided by, but not limited to, existing frameworks in the field of flipped learning research.

Participants

The participants in this study were 15 English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teacher from the English Study Program at the Faculty of Teacher Training and Education of a private university in South Sulawesi, Indonesia. Purposive sampling was used to select participants with experience implementing flipped learning in their EFL classrooms. This sampling strategy enabled the selection of information-rich cases that could provide valuable insights into the research question. The teachers varied in their teaching experience, but all had utilized flipped learning to some extent within the past two academic years. This criterion ensured that the participants possessed relevant experience and could provide informed perspectives on the challenges faced by students in this learning environment. The detailed demographic characteristics of the 15 EFL teachers are presented in Table 1.

Data collection and procedure

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews with each of the 15 participating teachers. The interviews were conducted individually, face-to-face at the university, or via video conferencing, depending on the teachers' availability and preference. A predetermined interview protocol was used to guide the interviews, ensuring that all relevant topics were covered. The interview protocol included open-ended questions to elicit teachers' perspectives on the challenges students face in flipped learning, including pre-class preparation, in-class activities, and overall adjustment to the flipped learning model. A complete list of the semi-structured interview questions is provided in Table 2.

TABLE 1 Participant demographics of EFL teachers.

Participant code	Gender	Highest degree	Years of teaching experience	Flipped learning use	Teaching level
Teacher 1	Male	Master's	15	2 years	Undergraduate
Teacher 2	Female	Master's	7	2 year	Undergraduate
Teacher 3	Male	Doctorate	18	2 years	Undergraduate
Teacher 4	Female	Master's	5	2.5 years	Undergraduate
Teacher 5	Male	Master's	10	2 years	Undergraduate
Teacher 6	Female	Master's	4	2 year	Undergraduate
Teacher 7	Female	Master's	12	2 years	Undergraduate
Teacher 8	Male	Master's	6	2 years	Undergraduate
Teacher 9	Female	Doctorate	20	2 years	Undergraduate
Teacher 0	Male	Master's	8	2.5 years	Undergraduate
Teacher 11	Female	Master's	3	2 year	Undergraduate
Teacher 12	Male	Master's	11	2 years	Undergraduate
Teacher 13	Female	Master's	5	2 year	Undergraduate
Teacher 14	Male	Doctorate	21	2 years	Undergraduate
Teacher 15	Female	Master's	9	2 years	Undergraduate

The interviews were audio-recorded to ensure accuracy and facilitate detailed analysis. Each interview lasted ~45 to 60 min. Before the interviews, participants were informed about the study's purpose and assured of the confidentiality of their responses. Written informed consent was obtained from each participant before the interview commencing.

Data analysis

The audio-recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim. Verbatim transcription was employed to preserve the full richness and authenticity of the participants' spoken language, including pauses, repetitions, and informal expressions. This level of detail was essential for thematic analysis, as it allowed the researchers to identify nuanced meanings, patterns, and language choices that may have been lost in edited or summarized transcripts (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017). Capturing the participants' voices in their original form enhanced the depth of interpretation and ensured that the coding process remained grounded in the actual expressions of participants (Halcomb and Davidson, 2006). Moreover, verbatim transcription contributed to the trustworthiness of the analysis by providing an auditable and transparent link between the raw data and the thematic findings, thus allowing for a more accurate representation and interpretation of participants' perspectives.

Following the six-phase process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019), thematic analysis was employed to analyze the interview data. This involved (1) familiarization with the data through repeated reading and listening to the recordings; (2) generating initial codes by identifying recurring patterns and

TABLE 2 The list of interview questions of flipped learning challenges.

No.	Questions
1	What challenges do students face when preparing for flipped learning sessions, such as watching pre-recorded lectures or completing assigned tasks beforehand?
2	Have you observed any difficulties related to students' access to learning materials (e.g., internet access, technology)?
3	How do students manage their time for independent study in flipped learning? Is this a challenge for them?
4	What challenges do students encounter when participating in active learning activities during class sessions?
5	Do you find students struggling to ask questions or engage in discussions during flipped learning sessions? Why do you think this happens?
6	Are there any specific academic challenges student's faces in flipped learning, such as understanding the content independently?
7	Do students report difficulties transitioning from traditional to flipped learning in terms of workload or comprehension?
8	Have you noticed students feeling overwhelmed, unmotivated, or stressed during the flipped learning process? If so, what do you think contributes to these feelings?
9	Are there any social challenges, such as students feeling isolated or having limited opportunities to interact with peers?

These questions were used during semi-structured interviews to explore teachers' perspectives on the challenges faced by students in the flipped learning approach.

meaningful segments of the data; (3) searching for themes by grouping related codes and identifying broader patterns of meaning; (4) reviewing themes to ensure they accurately represented the data and were internally consistent; (5) defining and naming themes by developing clear and concise descriptions

TABLE 3 Code and theme found.

Code found	Theme
Time management, self-discipline, workload, pacing	Time management issues
Internet access, technology, devices, connectivity	Technology access problem
Active participation, communication, shyness, confidence, collaboration, group work	Communication barriers
Independent learning, comprehension, understanding, vocabulary	Comprehension difficulties
Transition, adjustment, workload, stress, motivation, overwhelmed	Transition challenges
Social interaction, isolation, peer interaction, group cohesion	Social interaction limitations

of each theme; and (6) producing the report by selecting illustrative excerpts from the transcripts to support the identified themes.

Two researchers were involved in the coding process independently to enhance the credibility of the findings. After independently generating initial codes, the researchers compared their coding outcomes and discussed discrepancies until a consensus was reached. This collaborative approach helped minimize individual bias and ensured that the themes accurately reflected the participants' perspectives.

Themes were further validated through peer debriefing and re-examination of the raw data to confirm consistency between the codes and the interview excerpts. An audit trail was maintained to document coding decisions, theme development, and changes made during the analysis. The researchers conducted the analysis systematically and collaboratively to enhance the rigor and trustworthiness of the findings. Thematic coding and the corresponding themes that emerged from the data are summarized in Table 3.

Credibility and transferability

To ensure the credibility of the findings, several strategies were employed. First, member checking was conducted by sharing the interview transcripts and the preliminary analysis with the participants to verify the accuracy of the interpretations and ensure that their perspectives were accurately represented. Second, prolonged engagement with the data, through repeated reading and analysis, allowed for a deep understanding of the participants' experiences. Third, detailed descriptions of the participants, the data collection process, and the data analysis procedures were provided to enhance the transparency of the research process.

Transferability, the extent to which the findings can be applied to other contexts, was addressed by providing detailed and thick descriptions of the research setting, the participants, and the specific challenges faced by

students in this context. This enables readers to make informed decisions about the applicability of the findings to their settings. While the findings may not be directly generalizable to all EFL classrooms, the detailed descriptions can offer valuable insights for educators and researchers in similar contexts.

Findings

Theme 1: time management issues

Teachers reported that many students struggled to manage their time effectively, particularly when preparing for flipped learning activities. This included difficulties in prioritizing study tasks, balancing academic and personal responsibilities, and adhering to consistent learning schedules.

"I think time management and self-discipline are common challenges for the pre-class preparation... it requires a lot of time management and self-discipline" (Teacher 11).

"Also, many students struggle to balance independent study with other academic or personal responsibilities, including organizations they join" (Teacher 2).

"One of the challenges here is managing their time effectively. Another challenge is staying disciplined to complete the tasks independently. I think this still relates to time management" (Teacher 7).

"It is on time allocation. So, some or a few of them may come to the class and then say. We didn't have enough time to read or watch the video last night" (Teacher 3).

These findings reflect broader issues of learner self-regulation and time autonomy, which are essential in student-centered learning models, such as flipped classrooms (Zimmerman and Schunk, 2011). The struggle to manage time may also indicate gaps in metacognitive awareness and the need for structured scaffolding to help students develop self-monitoring strategies. These observations suggest that students may need explicit instruction and support in developing effective time management strategies and self-regulatory skills to succeed in a flipped learning context. This model's increased autonomy and responsibility may expose pre-existing weaknesses in these areas, requiring educators to address them proactively.

Theme 2: technology access problems

Access to devices and stable internet emerged as a significant barrier. Teachers noted that many students faced technical limitations at home, hindering their ability to engage with pre-class materials.

"The students, I think I can say, generally have problems with poor internet connections and limited device access" (Teacher 1).

"I observed that the main challenge is Internet data or Internet access. I think this is a technical issue with Internet

access, which still feels burdensome for some because they have to do it at home. I think most of them lack Internet access” (Teacher 2).

“Some feel overwhelmed by the volume of pre-class activities. A few students also face technical difficulties, such as poor internet access, but this is not common” (Teacher 15).

These observations align with global literature on equity in digital learning (Du, 2020), highlighting how infrastructure limitations disproportionately affect learners in rural or low-income settings. The digital divide not only limits students’ access to content but also reduces their opportunity to participate meaningfully in collaborative and interactive learning, which are essential in flipped learning environments. Without addressing this digital divide, students may be unable to participate in pre-class activities fully, thereby undermining the intended benefits of the flipped learning approach. Educators must consider strategies for providing or facilitating access to technology and the Internet for all students to ensure equitable learning opportunities.

Theme 3: Communication barriers

Student hesitancy in class discussions and group work was attributed to shyness, lack of confidence, or unpreparedness. Teachers observed that even when students had ideas, many struggled to express themselves or engage collaboratively.

“Some find it hard to participate actively... they probably have many ideas in their mind, but it’s quite hard for them to express themselves in the classroom” (Teacher 4).

“I think around 30% of them are still inactive in collaboration. Maybe because they are still shy in interacting with their classmates” (Teacher 6).

“The challenges include feeling unprepared if they have not engaged sufficiently with pre-class materials. Another challenge is difficulty in working collaboratively” (Teacher 10).

“Some students are hesitant to ask questions or engage in class discussions because they feel unprepared or shy if they don’t understand the material well. Many also lack confidence in expressing their thoughts in a group setting” (Teacher 12).

These challenges may be interpreted through the lens of social presence theory (Garrison and Kanuka, 2004), where students’ reluctance to interact reflects low levels of interpersonal comfort and perceived connectedness. The absence of communicative confidence can also be linked to affective filters in second language learning, which hinder student performance even when comprehension is present. Collectively, these observations underscore the importance of educators creating a supportive and inclusive classroom environment that fosters participation, builds trust, and equips students with effective communication and collaboration strategies.

Theme 4: comprehension difficulties

Teachers noted that some students found it challenging to understand materials without direct teacher guidance, especially when faced with complex concepts or unfamiliar vocabulary.

“Based on my experience in the classroom, I think the common challenge is forgetting vocabulary related to the topic, which still causes difficulties in understanding the paragraphs” (Teacher 5).

“A common academic challenge is understanding the material independently without direct guidance from lecturers. Some students struggle with more complex concepts” (Teacher 9).

These issues suggest a need for cognitive scaffolding, especially for lower-proficiency EFL learners. According to cognitive load theory (Sweller, 1988), when learners are presented with unfamiliar or abstract content without adequate support, working memory can become overloaded, reducing learning effectiveness. Vocabulary gaps also heighten intrinsic load, impeding comprehension. These findings suggest that flipped learning designs should incorporate explicit vocabulary support, chunked materials, and guided comprehension strategies to facilitate effective independent learning, particularly in linguistically demanding tasks.

Theme 5: transition challenge

Students accustomed to teacher-centered methods reported stress and discomfort when transitioning to the flipped model, primarily due to the increased workload and the need for self-discipline.

“My students often report struggles with the increased workload... And then at that time, we have to, like, make the adaptations of a new format if I find that they find the, you know, the material too complex” (Teacher 8).

“Many students report feeling overwhelmed... They feel stressed, especially when they are not accustomed to the self-regulation required in flipped learning. The pressure to manage time effectively, stay on top of pre-class activities, and engage actively in class contributes to the stress and feelings of being unmotivated” (Teacher 12).

“Transitioning from traditional learning to flipped learning can be difficult for students. They may struggle with the increased workload, especially the responsibility to complete pre-class tasks” (Teacher 14).

These experiences reflect the challenges inherent in what Mezirow (1991) describes as transformative learning, where shifts in learning roles and identities may cause initial disorientation before growth occurs. Students used to didactic, teacher-led instruction may feel destabilized when asked to assume greater agency and accountability. Without structured support and communicated expectations, such shifts can lead to disengagement. These observations underscore the importance of supporting students during the transition to a flipped learning approach. This might include scaffolding pre-class assignments, offering explicit instruction in self-regulation strategies, and creating a supportive classroom environment that acknowledges the challenges of the new learning model.

Theme 6: social interaction limitations

Reduced peer interaction in flipped settings led some students to feel isolated or disconnected from their learning community.

“Yes, I guess I can still find that some students might feel isolated during the classroom without, yeah, especially without the peer interactions and group cohesion” (Teacher 1).

“In flipped learning, students might feel isolated if they don’t have opportunities to interact with their peers outside of class. Some students may struggle with group dynamics or struggle to collaborate with their classmates” (Teacher 3).

These insights align with the Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework (Garrison, 2024), particularly the element of social presence, which is crucial in fostering meaningful engagement and collaborative learning. If learners feel socially disconnected or unsupported, it can diminish motivation and limit participation. These observations highlight the importance of intentionally designing flipped learning experiences that promote social interaction and foster community building. Educators should consider strategies for promoting peer learning, encouraging collaboration inside and outside the classroom, and creating opportunities for students to connect. Addressing the potential for social isolation is crucial for maximizing student engagement and creating a supportive learning environment in flipped classrooms.

Discussion

This study identifies several key challenges students face in implementing flipped learning in Indonesian EFL classrooms. These findings provide valuable insights into the complexities of this instructional model and highlight areas that require targeted support.

One of the most significant challenges is the lack of effective time management and self-regulation skills. Teachers reported that students often struggle to allocate sufficient time for pre-class activities, balance academic and personal responsibilities, and maintain the self-discipline required for independent study. This aligns with existing research on the importance of self-regulated learning in flipped classrooms (Lau, 2021; Öztürk and Çakiroğlu, 2021; Yang et al., 2020). The autonomy required in flipped learning places greater responsibility on students, which can be difficult for those lacking effective strategies (Zimmerman and Schunk, 2011). These findings suggest that educators should explicitly teach time management, task prioritization, and self-monitoring skills to help students succeed.

Another major challenge is inconsistent access to technology and reliable internet connectivity. Teachers noted that students often face difficulties accessing online resources due to unreliable internet or lack of proper devices. This digital divide creates unequal learning opportunities and hinders full participation in flipped learning (Du, 2020; Wikanta et al., 2023). Similar studies emphasize that equitable access is essential for effective technology-enhanced learning (Misnawati and Anwar, 2024; Pilu and Nur, 2023). To address this, institutions should consider initiatives such as providing devices, subsidizing the Internet, or offering offline materials (Egbert et al., 2014).

Teachers also reported that students often hesitate to participate in discussions or actively collaborate with their peers. Factors such as shyness, lack of confidence, and unpreparedness

contribute to this issue, limiting their ability to fully engage in flipped learning activities (Birgili et al., 2021; Lertcharoenwanich and Soontornwipast, 2024). Research highlights the need to foster inclusive classroom environments that encourage participation and reduce anxiety (Arslan, 2020; Bond, 2020). Strategies such as small-group discussions, structured prompts, and peer collaboration can help students become more comfortable and engaged.

Another significant challenge is difficulty in understanding content independently. Teachers observed that students often struggle with complex concepts and unfamiliar vocabulary when learning without direct guidance (Zimmerman and Schunk, 2011). This suggests a need for explicit instruction in self-directed strategies such as note-taking and text analysis. Research supports scaffolding independent learning by providing structured resources and opportunities for peer discussion (Misnawati et al., 2023; Pilu et al., 2022). Teachers should ensure students have access to supplementary materials, guided practice, and opportunities for clarification.

Adjusting to the flipped learning model is another common issue. Teachers noted that students often feel overwhelmed by the increased workload and struggle with demands for self-regulation. This finding is consistent with research suggesting that transitioning from traditional to flipped classrooms requires clear expectations and ongoing support (Turan and Akdag-Cimen, 2020). Studies recommend orientation sessions and workload management strategies to help students adapt (Bhavsar, 2020; Kartika et al., 2018; Song and Kapur, 2017).

The study also highlights the potential for reduced social interaction and feelings of isolation. Some students reported limited peer engagement, which negatively affected their learning experience. This highlights the importance of intentionally designing activities that foster collaboration and community building (Chen et al., 2014; Zainuddin and Perera, 2019). Peer support and interaction enhance engagement and reduce isolation (Misnawati et al., 2022). To address this, flipped learning should incorporate group projects, discussion forums, and opportunities for feedback (Pilu et al., 2022).

These findings highlight the complexity of implementing flipped learning and underscore the importance of considering students’ diverse needs and learning contexts. Simply providing online materials is insufficient—successful implementation requires a comprehensive approach that supports students academically, socially, and technologically. Key strategies include providing explicit instruction in self-regulation, ensuring equitable access to technology, implementing inclusive classroom practices, and providing structured support for transitions.

While this multifaceted approach offers a solid framework, its success depends on local realities. In under-resourced settings, digital solutions may not be feasible. Thus, low-tech alternatives such as pre-loaded media or printed materials should be considered (Zainuddin and Halili, 2016). Likewise, in teacher-centered or hierarchical learning cultures, promoting autonomous learning and peer collaboration may require gradual scaffolding and consistent support (Turan and Akdag-Cimen, 2020). Institutional readiness, leadership commitment, and infrastructure are also crucial (Garrison and Kanuka, 2004). Hence, flexibility and cultural sensitivity are key to making flipped learning both inclusive and sustainable.

The study contributes to the literature by providing context-specific insights into student challenges in flipped classrooms, grounded in the perspectives of teachers. For educators, it highlights the importance of providing proactive support, particularly in fostering student self-regulation and ensuring equitable access to resources. For researchers, this study highlights the need for further investigation into the effectiveness of tailored interventions that address these challenges. Future research could investigate the effects of various instructional strategies, technology integration models, and student support systems in diverse English as Foreign Language (EFL) contexts. Examining the influence of cultural, institutional, and demographic variables will also help shape more responsive and effective flipped learning practices.

Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by Ethics Committee of Universitas Cokroaminoto Palopo. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

RP: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. BJ: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. IS: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Generative AI statement

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