



## Exploring Selected Teachers' Perceptions of Using Learner-Centred Approaches at Dzindi Circuit Secondary Schools

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### Abstract

Teachers' perceptions regarding teaching approaches are indispensable in education. This study explored selected Grade 10 English First Additional Language (EFAL) teachers' perceptions of using learner-centred approaches at Dzindi Circuit secondary schools, South Africa. The population of this study comprised 21 teachers from the same circuit. Using a 20% population sampling norm, four purposively selected teachers participated in this study. The study adopted a qualitative research method to gain in-depth knowledge of these approaches. Protocols relating to classroom observations and interviews were applied to clarify the data collection processes. Thematic analysis was used to interpret data because it systematically organises complex data sets and packages the themes accordingly. After analysing empirical studies from 2023 to 2024, based on the impact of learner-centred approaches on academic performance, a preliminary study conducted on three teachers who were not part of the target showed learners' poor competence in essay writing. However, after employing learner-centred approaches, learners performed outstandingly. This study's implication is that learners and teachers can benefit from using learner-centred approaches. Future researchers can investigate the indispensability of these approaches. The study recommends teachers' frequent use of learner-centred approaches to promote learners' success in education.

### Keywords

Benefits, Learner-centred approaches, Synchronous online teaching, Teachers' perceptions

### INTRODUCTION

Teacher-centred and learner-centred techniques have been the leading approaches from time immemorial (Msonde, 2023; Young et al., 2023). However, learner-centred approaches are gaining significant momentum in education despite the reigning supreme of synchronous online teaching styles (Shandu-Omukunyi, 2023). Learner-centred approaches empower learners to control their studies (Berg & Lepp, 2023; Schneider et al., 2023) as they are taught how to think, not what to think (Nkeala & Simango, 2023; Tcherkassof & Dupré, 2021). Moreover, learners can participate actively in the lessons (Shandu-Omukunyi, 2023) if learner-centred approaches are utilised.

The transition from teacher to learner-centred approaches entails an educational shift from the traditional method of imparting knowledge to the students. Berg and Lepp (2023) postulate that it is an approach whereby teachers are facilitators of students' learning by empowering them to take control of their studies, study in groups, and be listened to by the teachers. Students' needs are considered to enhance theoretical and practical learning (Msonde, 2023), strengthen their self-reliance, and improve generic competencies, including problem-solving and critical-thinking abilities. Learner-centred approaches are characterised by engaging students in the complex, messy work of learning, encouraging them to reflect on what they are learning and how they are learning it, sharing the learning programmes, and teaching them how to think, evaluate evidence, analyse arguments, and generate hypotheses (Nkealah & Simango, 2023).

English First Additional Language (EFAL) teachers teach the language to learners who have already experienced one or more other languages, although not necessarily fluently (Shandu-Omukunyi, 2023) before studying English. EFAL is designed for learners who do not speak English as their first language (L1). Hence, teachers develop learners' basic language skills, such as reading, writing, and speaking, to communicate effectively (Nkealah & Simango, 2023). Teacher-centred approaches entail a situation where teachers take complete control of the class, resulting in learners losing focus and missing out on learning (Doyle, 2023). These approaches are informed by behaviourism theory, which considers learners to be respondents to external stimuli while teachers are experts who impart all the relevant information.

A learner-centred approach removes mastery from the sole province of teachers and allows learners to be masters, too. Its domain includes the knowledge base, strategic processing, executive control, increased motivation, and effect on learning or context (Berg & Lepp, 2023), such as how the teachers offer their subject matters and how negatively or positively learners are engaged in the learning process (Nkealah & Simango, 2023). Teachers sometimes interfere in learning, preventing learners from fully participating (Shandu-Omukunyi, 2023). Consequently, if learners are denied complete independent participation in the lesson, they find it boring, often leading to low retention of information and understanding of concepts.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The studies conducted by Doyle (2023), Gravani et al. (2023), Hashim et al. (2023), Nhung (2023), Nováková (2023), O'Neill and Petchko (2023) and Mat and Jamaludin (2024) indicated the “need for longitudinal studies on long-term effects, cultural considerations, and strategies to address implementation barriers in resource-constrained environments” (Mat & Jamaludin, 2024:1025). In this sense, current trends and innovations in learner-centred approaches include technology (Dakovic & Zhang, 2020; Evangelou, 2023), integration, cross-curricular approaches, and inclusive practices for diverse learners are indispensable. Hence, learner-centred approaches “emerged as a transformative pedagogical approach that prioritises active student engagement and personalised learning experiences” (Mat & Jamaludin, 2024).

Learner-centred approaches do not lead to low retention in knowledge acquisition (Schneider et al., 2023; González-Mujico & Lasagabaster, 2024) as do the teacher-centred. Nevertheless, learner-centred approaches are beneficial in teaching EFAL lessons regarding learners' developmental needs, learning styles and cognitive abilities (Dunbar & Yadav, 2022), promoting the learner's academic success, motivation and overall development (Abdigapbarova & Zhiyenbayeva, 2023). In this regard, learners' cognitive, social development, affective and communication skills are enhanced in the learning processes.

The classroom dynamics include discussions and brainstorming ideas (Schneider et al., 2023) and adding PowerPoint slides or mind maps to a lesson (Cerqueira et al., 2023). Furthermore, according to Dada et al. (2023), the other activities that enhance learning include fostering collaboration with group projects, delivering presentations in-person or via live webinars, gamifying learning and role-playing where learners take turns face-to-face to show learners how a particular lesson is engaged (Hashim et al., 2023).

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study was underpinned by a Swiss-born French theorist, Jacque Rousseau's (1712-1778) learner-centred theory. This theory holds that learners' freedom and capabilities (Tamkeen, 2023) are indispensable in learning EFAL and other subjects. Sakata et al. (2023) argue that, in teaching, teachers should not start by focusing on the information they wish learners to learn but rather consider those capabilities and interests (Otto et al., 2024). The capabilities and interests and ensures learners know best as self-directed equals *vis-a-vis* their teachers. Sakata (2022) postulates that learner-centred approaches negotiate the learning content and learners' self-evaluation. In this regard, Doyle (2023) asserts that learner-centred approaches dramatically impact how much training information learners need to retain.

As learner-centred approaches are also based on learners' activities, such as free writing and journaling, knowledge and theories are developed rather than accepted by their teachers (Adams et al., 2023). Alkhabra et al. (2023) maintain that learner-centred approaches enable the development of knowledge and theories rather than accepting them from their teachers. Learners are active agents who bring expertise and past experiences into the learning environment and can acquire informed knowledge independently. They participate earnestly and shape learning by asking questions and engaging with peers chaotically (Duncan et al., 2023). However, teachers can design provoking activities to increase learners' skills, give learners freedom in learning (Wang et al., 2023), and provide them with positive feedback.

The literature gap from the previous studies aimed to explore selected Grade 10 English EFAL teachers' perceptions of using learner-centred approaches at Dzindi Circuit secondary schools, South Africa, describe and evaluate the effectiveness of these approaches in teaching and learning. The study attempted to answer the research questions: 1) What are the Grade 10 EFAL teachers' perceptions of using learner-centred approaches at Dzindi Circuit secondary schools, South Africa? 2) How can the Grade 10 EFAL teachers describe the benefits of learner-centred approaches in essay writing at Dzindi Circuit secondary schools, South Africa? and 3) How effective are learner-centred approaches in teaching and learning at Dzindi Circuit secondary schools, South Africa?

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study adopted a qualitative research approach over a quantitative one because the researcher wanted to obtain an in-depth understanding (Herjanto et al., 2023) of using learners-centred approaches. Also, this method “systematises data collected using instruments including interviews and observations “geared toward theory development and refinement” (Fischer & Guzel, 2023:259). However, the main limitations of using the qualitative research approach (Dehalwar & Sharma, 2024:18) include difficulty in generalising findings to a broader population due to small sample sizes, potential for researcher bias in data interpretation, subjective nature of data, time-consuming data collection and analysis, and challenges in establishing clear and objective conclusions due to the reliance ample, descriptive data.

## Research design

The study employed an exploratory research design to gain initial insights and understand a topic using qualitative interviews and observations (Khoa et al., 2023). It uncovers new insights and lays the groundwork for research that identifies key variables, refines research questions (Cheung, 2023) based on the research questions, gains a preliminary grasp of complex issues before delving into arduous data collection methods, and offers a comprehensive report of the findings, and examines emerging themes.

The limitations of exploratory research design are that “it is not externally valid and generalisable and suffers from biases and subjectivity in interpretation” (Benbrahim et al., 2024: 58). In the exploratory research design, establishing transparent cause-and-effect relationships is difficult due to reliance on observed correlations. It is time-consuming, has high resource requirements, significant and limited control over real-world variables, and a narrow focus on a specific hypothesis, limiting understanding of complex issues (Longe, 2024: n. p.).

## Research participants

The population of this study comprised 21 Grade 10 EFAL teachers from Dzindi Circuit secondary schools. Using a 20% population sampling norm, four purposively selected teachers participated in the investigation. The researcher could not control the minimally sampled teachers because the setting was based on where the participants shared similar characteristics. Also, the researcher employed convenience sampling because it enabled him to select the research participants based on their accessibility, approachability, and availability to the researcher, which aligns more with the flexible nature of qualitative research where in-depth understanding is prioritised over statistical generalisation (Nikolopoulou, 2023).

The inclusion and exclusion criteria (Anwar et al., 2023) were based on having taught EFAL for over five years in secondary schools in the Dzindi Circuit, South Africa. According to Nikolopoulou (2023: n. p.), the inclusion and exclusion criteria assist the researcher in identifying the study population in a consistent, reliable, and objective manner. As a result, study participants are likelier to have the attributes that will make it possible to answer the research question robustly. The following table represents the demographic profile of the participants in the present study:

**Table 1** Demographic Profile of the Participants (n=21)

Teachers	Gender	Teaching Experience	Competence in English
One	Male	5 years	reasonable
Two	Female	8 years	Poor
Three	Female	7 years	reasonable
Four	Female	6 years	Fair

Four columns and five rows represent data visualisation in Table 1. The upper column represents the number of teachers One, Two, Three and Four. The second column shows the participants' gender and teaching experience, ranging from five to eight years in the third. The extreme right column depicts competence in English, namely poor, fair and reasonable. There were two reasonable competencies, one poor and one fair, respectively. There were four teachers, namely, one male and three females. Teacher One had five years of teaching experience, Two had eight, Three had seven, and Four had six.

## Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations guard against the rights and well-being of research participants to ensure the truthfulness of the research process (Okorie et al., 2024). In this study, permission to conduct the study was obtained from the Limpopo Department of Education, the Dzindi Circuit manager, the principals of the schools in the same circuit, and the parents or guardians of the participants who were underage. Ethical considerations were duly observed. For example, in the ‘Informed consent’, the participants were told that their participation was voluntary as they were not participating under duress or coercion and could withdraw as they wished. The participants ‘Anonymity and confidentiality’ were observed because numbers represented the teachers' names and the Dzindi Circuit secondary schools. Regarding ‘Harm to participants’, the participants were not placed under psychological or physical harm.

## Data collection

Before data were collected, a feasibility study was conducted using classroom observations and semi-structured interviews with three teachers not part of the study group to test the reliability of research instruments. Research protocols observed by the researcher include defining research objectives and selecting appropriate methods such as classroom observations and semi-structured interviews. Lim (2024) postulates that designing data collection instruments, ensuring consistency in data collection, and implementing quality checks to maintain data integrity and reliability while adhering to ethical guidelines. Also, research guidelines were strictly observed, and data were collected from the administered written essays titled ‘The importance of autonomous learning’ to assess learners’ progress in learning.

## Data analysis

Thematic analysis software was employed because it can identify patterns, package the codes, and interpret findings from the themes (Herjanto et al., 2023; 2023; Paulus, 2023). The limitations of thematic analysis software include its subjective

nature, leading to bias in interpreting themes, potential inconsistency in applying the method due to its flexibility, difficulty in handling complex datasets, and a lack of clear guidelines for rigorous analysis compared to other qualitative methods, often requiring a high level of researcher expertise to ensure reliable results (Terry et al., 2017).

Nevertheless, the transcripts were added by dragging and dropping the text files on the board. The new codes were created, structured, nested (Ndlovu et al., 2023) and added while the unnecessary ones were removed. These codes were placed on one side, and thoughts were synthesised and jotted down in code descriptions. They were checked to see how representative they appeared across all transcripts. Each time the high-level view was observed, it was exported into a document to write narratives.

### **Measurement of quality control: trustworthiness**

In this study, to ensure the trustworthiness of the present study, the researcher engaged various features of measurement control, including the rigour of the research design, the credibility of the data sources, and the transparency of the data collection and analysis process (Shufutinsky, 2020). To enhance the credibility of this study, the findings from this study were shared with participants to seek their feedback to confirm or clarify their views and experiences. To enhance transferability, the researcher reflected on the participants' biases, assumptions, and perspectives in the study (Maxwell, 2021; Nephawe & Lambani, 2023) and how they influenced the research process and findings.

To ensure dependability for maintaining that the research is conducted consistently and reliably and that the findings are consistent and replicated (Skinner, Edwards & Smith, 2020), a detailed description of the research design was provided, such as the aim, research questions, data collection methods, and data analysis procedures. To ensure confirmability, the researcher critically reflected on the participants' assumptions and values (Kyngäs, Kääriäinen & Elo, 2020) that could have influenced the present study's process and interpretations.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The findings and discussion were based on classroom observations and semi-structured interviews of selected Grade 10 EFAL teachers in their respective classroom environments. The researcher aimed to obtain these teachers' perceptions regarding the benefits of learner-centred approaches at the Dzindi Circuit secondary schools, South Africa.

### **Findings from four classroom observations**

In this study, the researcher observed Grade 10 EFAL teachers teaching their learners in the classroom environment. To comply with ethical realities, all the research participants were denoted as Teachers One, Two, Three, and Four.

#### ***Excerpt 1: Teacher One***

Teacher One: Good morning, learners.

Learners (*in unison*): Good morning, thanks.

Teacher One: Today's task is about essay writing.

Learners (*in unison*): Sir, we appreciate it.

Teacher One: Can anyone tell us 'What an essay is?'

Mulalo (*intervenes*): A writing with an introduction, body, and conclusion.

Zwavhudi: Can I add something?

Teacher One: Ok. Go ahead.

Zwavhudi: It is divided into paragraphs, and each section has one main idea.

Teacher One: Now, in groups A and B, write the essay 'The importance of autonomous learning'.

Mukosi: Thank you, Sir. I hope you will enjoy our masterpieces.

Teacher One: Excellent. Submit your essay in 15 minutes.

Learners (*in unison*): Thank you, sir.

Excerpt 1 shows learners prefer working in collaborating groups, A and B, to being subjected to Teacher One's lesson. The participants were more excited to promote understanding of the subject matter when engaging in the essay writing lesson. The finding is congruent with Schneider et al. (2023), who claim that learner-centred approaches arouse interest in the lesson.

#### ***Excerpt 2: Teacher two***

Teacher Two: Good afternoon, class.

Learners: Good afternoon, Ma'am.

Teacher Two: dear learners, can anyone tell me what an essay is?

John: An essay is a piece of information about a particular topic.

Teacher Two: When writing an essay, start with a mind map.

Tshililo: What is a mind map, Madam?

Teacher Two: A summary that guides the writing of an essay.

Learners (*in unison*): We appreciate it, Madam.

Teacher Two: Thanks. Individually, write the topic: 'The importance of autonomous learning.'

Latani: (*intervenes after 5 minutes*): Ma'am. Mind mapping helped me rigorously.  
Teacher Two: It's OK. Submit your written work when you are done.

In the classroom, Teacher Two promoted individual working and a 'mind map' technique where learners were asked to scribble down what they wanted to write. The mind map technique motivated learners earnestly, especially when writing their essays. It is worth noting that learners wished to write their essays individually. Thus, learner-centred approaches are irreplaceable in this regard. The finding is congruent with Cerqueira et al. (2023), who argue that mind mapping is crucial when planning to write an essay.

### **Excerpt 3: Teacher Three**

Teacher Three: Hi, learners. Are you OK?  
Learners: Yeah, we are fine, Sir.  
Teacher Three: Here are PowerPoint slides to help you learn how to write an essay.  
Orifha: What is an essay?  
Zwothe (*answering*): A well-composed piece of writing.  
Teacher Three: You are right. But how do we write it?  
Aditya: It must have an introduction, body, and conclusion.  
Teacher Three: Excellent; here are PowerPoint slides to assist you when writing your essays.  
Tom: Right. Thank you, Sir. I think they will make us interested in the lesson.  
Lila: Wow! I know them. They are user-friendly, hey.  
Teacher Three: Sure. Write an essay: 'The importance of autonomous learning' as homework.'  
Learners (*together*): Very fine, thank you. We shall write it, Sir.

Excerpt 3 shows learners' interest in using PowerPoint slides to promote learner-centred approaches to the written essay based on the title: 'The importance of autonomous learning' as homework.' The use of PowerPoint stimulated learners' interest in their essay writing. The finding in this study supports González-Mujico and Lasagabaster's (2024) suggestion that this PowerPoint promotes independent and critical thinking autonomously.

### **Excerpt 4 Teacher Four**

Teacher Four: Aha, learners, I am pleased to meet you.  
Learners (*excitedly*): So do we, Madam.  
Teacher Four: Do you know how to do an essay?  
Learners (*in unison*): Just a little bit, Ma'am. Tell us more about it.  
Teacher Four: Okay, be sure you have all the components at hand.  
Learners (*curiously*): Like what, Madam?  
Teacher Four: Introduction, body, and conclusion.  
Sarah (*inquisitively*): And paragraphing?  
Teacher Four: Yes, and it must have one main idea per paragraph.  
Learners (*in unison*): Madam, how can we practise essay writing best?  
Teacher Four: In journaling, collect learning materials and submit them after two days.  
Londani: Which topic, Ma'am?  
Teacher Four: 'The importance of autonomous learning.'  
Learners: Thank you, Ma'am. Collecting these materials will assist us remarkably.

In this excerpt, learners were highly motivated to write their essays based on journal writing to promote learner-centred approaches. These participants enjoyed collecting materials that can assist them in essay writing in the classroom situation. Therefore, it is evident that learner-centred approaches are beneficial in teaching and learning. The finding is congruent with Goodwin and Kirkpatrick's (2023) suggestion that journaling enhances the individual learners' reflection and critical thinking.

In the classroom observation presented by Teachers One, Two, Three and Four, it is evident that collaborative learning, individual learning, free writing and journaling, and providing feedback to learners promote learner-centred approaches. All participants in the classroom observations were enthusiastic about learning independently after engaging robustly in the lesson using learner-centred approaches. In this regard, learner-centred approaches are indispensable in teaching and learning to write essays by the individual learners.

### **Findings from semi-structured interviews**

The semi-structured interview protocols were observed: the introduction of the researcher, introduction of the research topic and the research questions, collection of concept forms before the commencement of interviews, and interviewees' comments after the interview process (Goodwin & Kirkpatrick, 2023). Additionally, the researcher followed the general guidelines for conducting interviews, including being mindful of research bias exacerbated by predictions, choosing the right setting, and recording the events (Cerqueira et al., 2023). Data were collected from four transcripts based on the

perceptions of Grade 10 EFAL teachers regarding teachers' perceptions of the benefits of learner-centred approaches at the Dzindi Circuit secondary schools, South Africa.

The following emerging themes from the semi-structured interviews supported the findings from the researcher's class observations conducted in this study when the Grade 10 EFAL teachers presented their lessons to their students. As a result, the following semi-structured interviews were dichotomised from four teachers by the researcher:

***Education is challenging to acquire without using the appropriate teaching approaches.***

Appropriate teaching approaches are necessary to produce tangible outcomes for Grade 10 EFAL learners. However, inadequate teaching approaches are cumbersome and difficult to acquire. In this study, Teacher One remarked that

*When I teach essay writing to my Grade 10 EFAL learners, I hardly find appropriate strategies to enhance learning. My learners cannot compose their essays easily despite having been trained for over seven years.*

Teacher One's comment elucidates that teaching Grade 10 EFAL learners is difficult without appropriate learner-centred approaches. Thus, these approaches are essential to teaching essay writing to learners by their teachers. The finding is congruent with Hashim et al. (2023), who suggest that learner-centred approaches arouse participation in the lesson.

***Teacher-centred approaches are not always productive in education***

Teacher-centred approaches have consistently been applied in the quest for education since time immemorial. However, learners were and still are put under limited freedom in learning, resulting in boredom and dismay in the classroom environment. Teacher Two commented that

*When I use teacher-centred approaches, my Grade 10 EFAL learners do not often understand the lessons, although they seem to comprehend them easily. They usually display indignation when the essay is being presented and fall asleep.*

Teacher Two's comment depicts the learners' dissatisfaction and reluctance to learn when teacher-centred approaches are employed. Although teacher-centred approaches were and still are applied significantly, the results were and are not as preternatural as during learner-centred approaches, where complete autonomy is exercised in the learning environment. The finding contradicts Duncan et al. (2023), who maintain that teacher-centred approaches are irreplaceable in teaching and learning.

***Learner-centred approaches are a rationale behind learners' success***

Using learner-centred approaches provides more autonomous learning *vis-a-vis* face-to-face with teachers. Perception from four purposively selected Grade 10 EFAL teachers is that learner-centred approaches are a rationale behind learners' success in essay writing because they learn spontaneously. Teacher Three remarked that

*Since using learner-centred approaches in my classroom environment, I've seen remarkable progress in my students. Learners' interest in the subject matter has been sparked, and they consistently perform outstandingly in essay writing.*

The remark made supra shows learners can perform better if learner-centred approaches are utilised because they feel free to learn. However, the teacher's presence in the learning environment is the best remedy for teaching and learning. The finding supports Duncan et al. (2023) and O'Neill and Petchko (2023), who maintain that learner-centred approaches promote competence in essay writing.

***Using learner-centred approaches is unstoppable in teaching and learning***

Using learner-centred approaches is gaining considerable momentum because they promote resilience in teaching and learning. Based on how learners portray their freedom when teachers employ learner-centred approaches, it is evident that these approaches still have some recommendable benefits in education. Thus, Teacher Four commented that

*Learner-centred approaches stimulate Grade 10 EFAL learners' interest in any lesson. Thus, I will continue using learner-centred approaches, although deviating totally from teacher-centred approaches may have some inadequacies.*

Regarding this remark, it is evident that learner-centred approaches are gaining momentum in teaching and learning despite the emergence of natural challenges, including wars, pandemics, and other natural hazards. The possibility is that a learner-centred approach can exist continuously, although teacher-centred approaches cannot be wholly neglected in the teaching and learning domain. The finding aligns with Cerqueira et al. (2023) and Doyle (2023), who suggest that learner-centred approaches are here to stay due to their indispensability in teaching.

## CONCLUSION

The findings from this study elucidate the importance of employing learner-centred approaches in education worldwide. Regarding the objectives of this research: to explore selected Grade 10 English EFAL teachers' perceptions of using learner-centred approaches at Dzindi Circuit secondary schools, South Africa, describe and evaluate the effectiveness of these approaches in teaching and learning, this study found that learner-centred approach cannot be denied in education. The research questions in this study have been addressed according to the researcher's expectations from the participants' responses.

However, the limitation of this study was the time constraints because the researcher used a single period to conduct his investigation. As the researcher employed a simple random sampling technique and convenient sampling, the small sample size was a challenge because the population comprised 21 teachers, of which only four participated in this study due to their approachability based on the 20% population sampling norm. The researcher aimed to give all sampled members an equal chance of participation.

The findings from classroom observations and semi-structured interviews indicate that learner-centred approaches robustly enhance essay writing. Therefore, it is evident that learner-centred approaches promote individual or group learning with the assistance of a 'more knowledgeable other' than the teachers' presence in the lesson. The study discovered that learner-centred approaches are indispensable in teaching essay writing to enhance competence in using English as a medium of instruction in education.

This study contributes to the body of knowledge because the findings from classroom observation lessons and semi-structured interviews can promote the standard of education worldwide. Furthermore, the findings can bring insights into the irreplaceability of learner-centred approaches in teaching and learning. This study implies that learner-centred approaches are beneficial as they cut across all English grammatical elements and most academic pursuits worldwide. Teachers, learners, and curriculum designers, for example, can benefit from the findings. Future researchers can further research the indispensability of employing learner-centred approaches in education. This study recommends the frequent use of learner-centred approaches to improve the standard of education in teaching and learning.

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## DECLARATION OF CONFLICT

The author declares that he has no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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