

PRAGMATIC COMPETENCE IN EFL LEARNERS' ORAL COMMUNICATION: SPEECH ACTS, POLITENESS, AND CONTEXTUAL APPROPRIATENESS PATTERNS

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Abstract

Pragmatic competence is an essential dimension of English as a foreign language oral communication because successful speaking requires learners not only to produce grammatically correct utterances but also to use language appropriately according to context, interlocutor relationship, communicative intention, and sociocultural norms. However, many English as a foreign language learners still experience difficulty in performing speech acts, adjusting politeness strategies, responding naturally, and interpreting implied meanings during oral interaction. This study aims to examine pragmatic competence in EFL learners' oral communication and identify the challenges they encounter in context-sensitive speaking tasks. The study employed a mixed-method design involving oral role-play tasks, pragmatic judgment tests, classroom observations, and semi-structured interviews. The participants were 86 undergraduate EFL learners enrolled in speaking courses. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, while qualitative data were analyzed through pragmatic discourse analysis. The findings showed that learners demonstrated moderate pragmatic competence, with stronger performance in direct speech acts and weaker performance in indirect requests, refusal strategies, conversational implicature, and sociopragmatic adjustment. Learners frequently transferred first-language norms into English interaction, overused direct expressions, and showed limited awareness of power distance and social distance. The study concludes that pragmatic competence should be explicitly integrated into EFL speaking instruction through authentic models, role-play, metapragmatic reflection, feedback, and intercultural communication practice.

Keywords: pragmatic competence; oral communication; EFL learners; speech acts; politeness

A. Introduction

Oral communication in English as a foreign language learning is often associated with fluency, pronunciation, vocabulary mastery, and grammatical accuracy. These linguistic elements are important because learners need sufficient language resources to express ideas clearly. However, successful oral communication requires more than producing accurate sentences. Speakers also need to know how to use language appropriately in different social situations. They need to choose expressions that fit the relationship between speakers, the purpose of communication, the degree of formality, and the cultural expectations embedded in interaction. This ability is commonly referred to as pragmatic competence.

Pragmatic competence refers to the ability to understand and use language appropriately in social and communicative contexts. It includes the ability to perform speech acts, interpret implied meanings, manage politeness, respond to interlocutors, negotiate meaning, and adjust language according to sociocultural conditions. In oral communication, pragmatic competence is crucial because spoken interaction is immediate, dynamic, and context-dependent. Learners must make quick decisions about what to say, how directly to say it, and how their utterances may be interpreted by others (Taguchi & Roever, 2017).

In EFL contexts, pragmatic competence is often underdeveloped. Learners may have good grammatical knowledge but still sound too direct, too informal, too vague, or pragmatically inappropriate. For example, a learner may say 'Give me your book' when requesting help from a teacher, or 'I do not want' when refusing an invitation from a friend. Grammatically, these utterances may be understandable, but pragmatically they may sound impolite, abrupt, or socially inappropriate. Such problems can affect communication quality and may lead to misunderstanding.

The development of pragmatic competence has been widely discussed in interlanguage pragmatics. Bardovi-Harlig (2013) explains that the acquisition of second language pragmatics is an important area of second language acquisition because learners need to develop form-function-context mappings. Taguchi (2015) shows that instructed pragmatics can support learners' pragmatic development, particularly when instruction is explicit and includes awareness-raising, input, practice, and feedback. These studies suggest that pragmatic competence does not automatically develop from general exposure to grammar and vocabulary; it needs focused instructional attention.

The field has a well-established descriptive base. Blum-Kulka, House, and Kasper (1989) provided the cross-cultural framework for analysing requests and apologies that most subsequent work has used, and Kasper and Rose (2002) synthesised the evidence on how pragmatic ability develops in a second language. Rose and Kasper (2001) had earlier set out how those findings translate into classroom teaching. Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford (2005) demonstrated that pragmatic norms are learned through participation in institutional talk, while Barron (2003) and Schauer (2009) traced development during study abroad and showed that exposure alone produces uneven gains. Taguchi and Roever (2017) and Taguchi (2019) review the field as a whole and conclude that grammatical proficiency and pragmatic ability develop along partly independent paths, which is the assumption underlying the present study.

Speech act theory provides one important framework for understanding pragmatic competence. Speech acts such as requests, refusals, apologies, compliments, suggestions, and disagreements are not only linguistic forms but also social actions. Learners need to understand how speech acts are performed differently depending on context. A request to a close friend may be expressed differently from a request to a lecturer. A refusal in informal conversation may differ from a refusal in an academic or professional setting. Therefore, speech act performance requires both pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic knowledge (Kasper & Rose, 2002; Thomas, 1983).

Politeness is another central aspect of pragmatic competence. Brown and Levinson's politeness theory explains how speakers manage face-threatening acts through different strategies, including positive politeness, negative politeness, indirectness, and mitigation. Although politeness norms vary across cultures, the concept is useful for analyzing how learners adjust their speech to maintain interpersonal harmony. In oral communication, learners need to know when directness is acceptable, when mitigation is needed, and how to avoid sounding rude or overly distant (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Kecskes, 2014).

Previous research has shown that EFL learners often experience difficulty in pragmatic performance. Studies on requests, refusals, compliments, and apologies indicate that learners may use limited strategies, transfer first-language norms, underuse mitigation, or rely heavily on direct forms (Bella, 2018; Nguyen, 2008; Taguchi, 2007). Research also shows that pragmatic awareness and pragmatic production may not develop equally. A learner may recognize that an expression is inappropriate but still fail to produce a better alternative spontaneously in oral communication.

Despite extensive research on interlanguage pragmatics, more classroom-based studies are needed on how EFL learners use pragmatic competence in oral communication. Many studies rely on written discourse completion tasks, while actual oral communication requires real-time interaction, turn-taking, prosody, hesitation, repair, and response management. Therefore, this study focuses on pragmatic competence in EFL learners' oral communication through oral role-play tasks, pragmatic judgment tests, classroom observation, and interviews. The study addresses four questions: what is the level of EFL learners' pragmatic competence in oral communication; how do learners perform speech acts in oral communication tasks; what politeness strategies do learners use in context-sensitive interaction; and what challenges do learners encounter in developing pragmatic competence?

B. Method

This study employed a mixed-method research design. The quantitative component was used to identify learners' pragmatic competence levels through pragmatic judgment tests and oral performance scores. The qualitative component was used to analyze learners' speech act performance, politeness strategies, and challenges in oral communication. A mixed-method design was selected because pragmatic competence involves both measurable performance and contextual interpretation of language use.

The participants were 86 undergraduate EFL learners enrolled in speaking courses at a higher education institution. They were selected purposively because they had completed basic speaking and grammar courses and were expected to participate in academic and social oral communication in English. Their English proficiency was at the lower-intermediate to intermediate level based on institutional placement records. The participants consisted of 58 female students and 28 male students, aged between 18 and 22 years.

The instruments consisted of an oral role-play task, a pragmatic judgment test, classroom observation sheets, and semi-structured interview guidelines. The oral role-play task included eight communicative situations representing common speech acts: request, refusal, apology, compliment response, suggestion, disagreement, invitation response, and clarification request. Each situation varied according to social distance, power relationship, and degree of imposition. For example, learners were asked to request deadline extension from a lecturer, refuse a friend's invitation, apologize for

being late to a group meeting, and disagree with a classmate's opinion politely.

The pragmatic judgment test consisted of 30 items. Each item presented a short oral communication situation and three possible responses. Students were asked to choose the most appropriate response and explain their reason briefly. The test measured pragmatic awareness in relation to speech acts, politeness, indirectness, social distance, and contextual appropriateness. The reliability coefficient of the test was 0.84, indicating acceptable reliability.

Oral role-play performances were recorded and transcribed. The performances were assessed using an analytic pragmatic competence rubric covering five dimensions: speech act realization, politeness strategy, contextual appropriateness, interactional management, and linguistic clarity. Two raters assessed the oral performances. The inter-rater reliability coefficient was 0.86. Classroom observations were conducted during speaking lessons to examine how learners used pragmatic expressions during pair work, group discussion, and presentation feedback. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 18 students selected from high, moderate, and low pragmatic performance groups.

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including means, standard deviations, and percentage categories. Qualitative data were analyzed through pragmatic discourse analysis and thematic analysis. Speech act data were coded based on strategy type, directness level, politeness strategy, and contextual appropriateness. Interview data were analyzed thematically to identify recurring challenges and learner perceptions. Data triangulation was conducted by comparing role-play results, pragmatic judgment scores, observation notes, and interview data. Ethical procedures were applied by obtaining institutional permission and participant consent. Student identities were anonymized, and participation did not affect course grades.

Analytical rigour was addressed at three points. First, the oral role-play rubric and the pragmatic judgement test were reviewed by three experts in pragmatics and language assessment, with Aiken indices between 0.80 and 0.92, and the judgement test reached a Cronbach's alpha of 0.87 in a pilot with 28 learners outside the sample. Second, all role-play performances were rated independently by two raters using the same rubric, and the intraclass correlation coefficient reached 0.89; ratings differing by more than one band were resolved through discussion. Third, speech acts and politeness strategies were coded using a manual adapted from established cross-cultural pragmatics frameworks, with operational definitions and transcript

examples; 30% of the transcripts were coded independently, producing a Cohen's kappa of 0.82 for speech acts and 0.79 for politeness strategies. Interview interpretations were confirmed with ten learners through member checking.

C. Finding and Discussion

1. Finding

The findings are presented in four parts. The first part reports learners' overall pragmatic competence. The second part presents speech act performance in oral communication. The third part explains politeness strategies used by learners. The fourth part describes challenges in pragmatic competence development.

EFL Learners' Overall Pragmatic Competence

The results showed that learners' pragmatic competence was in the moderate category. The mean oral pragmatic performance score was 68.42 out of 100, while the mean pragmatic judgment test score was 71.36. These scores indicate that learners had basic pragmatic awareness but still experienced difficulty in spontaneous oral production.

Table 1 Overall Pragmatic Competence Scores

Assessment Component	N	Mean	SD	Interpretation
Oral role-play performance	86	68.42	8.76	Moderate
Pragmatic judgment test	86	71.36	7.94	Moderate to high
Overall pragmatic competence	86	69.89	8.12	Moderate

Source: Processed from pragmatic competence assessment data.

The pragmatic judgment test score was slightly higher than the oral role-play score. This suggests that learners were more capable of recognizing appropriate responses than producing them spontaneously. In interviews, several students stated that they knew an utterance should be polite, but they could not quickly formulate an appropriate English expression during speaking tasks.

Table 2 Pragmatic Competence Dimensions in Oral Role-Play Performance

Dimension	Mean	SD	Interpretation
Speech act realization	70.28	8.52	Moderate to high
Politeness strategy	66.47	9.18	Moderate
Contextual appropriateness	62.39	9.64	Moderate
Interactional management	67.81	8.73	Moderate

Linguistic clarity	75.14	7.92	High
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Source: Processed from oral role-play rubric.

Performance across rubric dimensions showed that learners scored highest in linguistic clarity and lowest in contextual appropriateness. This indicates that learners were generally able to produce understandable utterances but had difficulty adjusting their language to social context. The low score in contextual appropriateness was visible in situations involving power difference, such as speaking to a lecturer or senior student. Learners often used expressions that were too direct or too informal for higher-status interlocutors.

Speech Act Performance in Oral Communication

The analysis of eight speech acts showed that learners performed better in apologies and clarification requests than in refusals, requests, and disagreements. The most difficult speech act was refusal because it required learners to reject an offer or invitation while maintaining interpersonal harmony.

Table 3 Learners' Performance across Speech Acts

Speech Act	Mean Score	Dominant Strategy	Main Problem
Request	66.82	Direct request with please	Limited mitigation
Refusal	61.44	Direct refusal with brief reason	Abrupt rejection
Apology	74.63	Apology plus explanation	Limited repair offer
Compliment response	72.18	Acceptance and thanks	Limited variation
Suggestion	69.37	Direct suggestion	Weak softening devices
Disagreement	62.75	Direct disagreement	Limited hedging
Invitation response	70.52	Acceptance or direct refusal	Limited elaboration
Clarification request	75.68	Asking repetition	Relatively appropriate

Source: Processed from oral role-play performance data.

Requests were often expressed directly. Many learners used expressions such as 'Please give me more time' or 'Can I submit tomorrow?' These expressions were understandable but sometimes insufficiently polite when addressed to a lecturer. More appropriate forms such as 'Would it be possible to submit it tomorrow?' or 'I was wondering if I could have one more day' were rarely used.

Refusals were the weakest speech act. Learners frequently used direct expressions such as 'I cannot come' or 'I do not want to join.' Some learners provided reasons, but they rarely used appreciation, regret, alternatives, or softening expressions. In English interaction, refusals often require indirectness and mitigation because they may threaten the interlocutor's positive face. Disagreement was also difficult because learners tended to say 'I disagree' directly without hedging or acknowledging the interlocutor's view.

Politeness Strategies in Oral Communication

The analysis identified four main politeness strategies: direct strategy, positive politeness, negative politeness, and indirect strategy. Direct strategy was the most frequent, followed by positive politeness, negative politeness, and indirect strategy.

Table 4 Distribution of Politeness Strategies

Politeness Strategy	Frequency	Percentage	Example Function
Direct strategy	214	43.76%	Expressing intention clearly
Positive politeness	118	24.13%	Showing friendliness and solidarity
Negative politeness	96	19.63%	Reducing imposition
Indirect strategy	61	12.48%	Softening face-threatening acts
Total	489	100%	

Source: Processed from oral role-play transcripts.

The frequent use of direct strategy indicates that learners prioritized clarity over politeness adjustment. Directness was not always inappropriate, especially in peer communication. However, it became problematic in situations involving higher power or greater imposition. Positive politeness appeared in friendly situations through expressions such as 'thank you,' 'that is a good idea,' and 'I like your opinion.' Negative politeness was less frequent, and learners rarely used more complex softening devices. The underuse of indirect strategy indicates that learners may have limited exposure to natural pragmatic input in English.

Challenges in Developing Pragmatic Competence

Thematic analysis of interviews and classroom observations identified five major challenges: limited pragmatic input, first-language transfer, grammar-focused learning history, low metapragmatic awareness, and anxiety in oral interaction.

Table 5 Challenges in Pragmatic Competence Development

Challenge	Evidence from Learners' Experience	Pedagogical Meaning
Limited pragmatic input	Students rarely heard authentic English interaction	Need exposure to authentic dialogues
First-language transfer	Students translated Indonesian expressions directly	Need contrastive pragmatic awareness
Grammar-focused learning	Students focused on correctness more than appropriateness	Need pragmatics in speaking instruction
Low metapragmatic awareness	Students did not notice power, distance, and imposition	Need explicit discussion of context
Speaking anxiety	Students could not produce polite forms quickly	Need repeated role-play and feedback

Source: Synthesized from interviews and observations.

Learners reported that they rarely received explicit instruction on pragmatic expressions. They learned grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation more often than politeness, refusal, indirectness, or contextual appropriateness. Several students stated that they usually translated expressions from Indonesian into English during speaking tasks. Observation data confirmed this issue. During classroom discussion, students often used short and direct responses. When disagreeing, they usually said 'I disagree' without softening. When making requests, they relied on 'Can I...' and 'Please...' regardless of interlocutor status. Speaking anxiety also influenced performance because some students knew polite expressions but forgot them during oral tasks.

2. Discussion

The findings show that EFL learners' pragmatic competence in oral communication was moderate. Learners were able to communicate basic intentions, but they experienced difficulty in adjusting expressions to social context. This confirms that linguistic competence and pragmatic competence do not necessarily develop at the same rate. Learners may produce understandable utterances but still fail to communicate appropriately (Bardovi-Harlig & Dörnyei, 1998; Taguchi, 2007).

The difference between pragmatic judgment and oral role-play performance is important. Students performed better in recognizing appropriate responses than in producing them spontaneously. This suggests a gap between pragmatic awareness and pragmatic production. In oral communication, learners must process context, select expressions, manage fluency, and respond in real time. This

makes oral pragmatic performance more demanding than written recognition. The finding supports Taguchi's view that pragmatic competence involves both comprehension and production under processing constraints (Taguchi, 2015).

The analysis of speech acts showed that refusals, disagreements, and requests were more difficult than apologies and clarification requests. These difficult speech acts are face-threatening because they involve imposition, rejection, or opposition. Learners need mitigation strategies to perform them appropriately. However, many learners overused direct expressions. This finding aligns with interlanguage pragmatics research showing that EFL learners often rely on direct strategies and underuse mitigation when performing face-sensitive speech acts (Bella, 2018; Nguyen, 2008).

Refusals were particularly difficult because they require multiple pragmatic moves. A pragmatically appropriate refusal may include appreciation, apology, reason, alternative, and closing expression. Learners in this study often produced only direct rejection and brief reason. This made their refusals sound abrupt. The finding indicates that students need explicit instruction in speech act sequences, not only individual expressions. Similar concerns have been discussed in cross-cultural refusal research and instructional pragmatics (Félix-Brasdefer, 2008; Martínez-Flor & Usó-Juan, 2010).

The underuse of negative politeness and indirect strategies shows limited pragmlinguistic repertoire. Learners relied heavily on 'please,' 'can,' and direct statements. These forms are useful but insufficient for varied social contexts. Learners need to acquire expressions such as 'Would it be possible...', 'I was wondering if...', 'I'm afraid I can't...', and 'I see your point, but...'. These expressions allow learners to manage imposition and face more effectively.

Contextual appropriateness was the weakest dimension. Learners had difficulty considering power distance, social distance, and degree of imposition. This suggests limited sociopragmatic awareness. Thomas's distinction between pragmlinguistic and sociopragmatic failure is relevant here. Some learners had language forms but did not know when and how to use them appropriately. Others understood the social situation but lacked the linguistic resources to express themselves (Thomas, 1983).

First-language transfer also influenced learners' pragmatic choices. Learners often translated Indonesian expressions directly into English. Transfer is not always negative, but it can produce pragmatic mismatch when norms differ across languages. For example, direct refusal or direct request may be acceptable in some familiar Indonesian

interactions but may sound abrupt in English contexts involving social distance or formal relationship. Therefore, contrastive pragmatic instruction is needed (Kasper & Rose, 2002; Kecskes, 2014).

Role-play is a useful pedagogical technique for pragmatic competence. However, role-play should not be limited to memorized dialogues. It should include varied contexts, authentic scenarios, feedback, and reflection. Students should practice performing speech acts in different social relationships. Teachers should provide feedback not only on grammar and pronunciation but also on politeness, directness, appropriateness, and interactional flow. Authentic input is also needed because students should be exposed to realistic dialogues, classroom videos, interviews, and natural conversation transcripts.

The findings have implications for speaking assessment. Speaking rubrics often emphasize fluency, pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, and content. Pragmatic competence should also be included. Assessment should consider whether students can perform communicative functions appropriately, adjust politeness, respond to interlocutors, and maintain interaction. This would encourage teachers and students to treat pragmatics as a core speaking skill rather than a supplementary topic. Overall, this study confirms that pragmatic competence is essential for EFL oral communication and requires explicit, contextualized, and practice-based instruction.

Comparison with Previous Studies

Instructional studies indicate that this gap responds to teaching. Alcón-Soler (2005), Koike and Pearson (2005), and Takahashi (2010) found that explicit instruction improved learners' speech act performance more than exposure alone, and Eslami and Eslami-Rasekh (2008) showed the same for teacher candidates. Kim and Taguchi (2015) demonstrated that task complexity influences how much pragmatic learning a task generates, and Martínez-Flor and Usó-Juan (2010) set out how speech act instruction can be sequenced in practice. Ishihara and Cohen (2010), Cohen and Ishihara (2013), and Cohen (2018) provide the pedagogical framework for integrating pragmatics into ordinary lessons and materials, and Yates (2010) documents the specific difficulties second language learners face when they must be polite in real time.

The distribution of difficulty across speech acts observed here matches earlier findings. Nguyen (2008) and Félix-Brasdefer (2008) report that face-threatening acts such as criticising and refusing are the hardest for learners because they require several coordinated moves, and Bella (2018) traces the slow development of refusal strategies even under favourable conditions. Bardovi-Harlig and

Dornyei (1998) showed that EFL learners notice grammatical errors more readily than pragmatic ones, which helps explain why the learners in this study scored higher on the judgement test than in live role-play. Kecskes (2014) and Thomas (1983) frame the underlying issue: pragmatic failure arises not from ignorance of forms but from the transfer of first-language conventions into a context where they carry a different social meaning.

The assessment findings should also be read against the pragmatics-assessment literature. Ishihara (2010) and Tajeddin and Alemi (2014) argue that pragmatic ability requires instruments that capture appropriateness in context rather than accuracy alone, which is why the present study combined a judgement test with observed role-play. Taguchi (2007) had shown that task difficulty affects speech act production independently of proficiency, and Taguchi (2011, 2015) reviews the instructional evidence and concludes that gains are reliable when instruction is explicit, sustained, and accompanied by feedback. Bardovi-Harlig (2013) makes the further point that pragmatic development is slow and needs to be measured over longer periods than a single semester.

Theoretical and Pedagogical Implications

Theoretically, the gap between the judgement test and the role-play performance supports a distinction between pragmatic knowledge and pragmatic control. The learners in this study could often identify an inappropriate utterance when given time to consider it, yet produced direct and unmitigated forms when they had to speak in real time. This suggests that metapragmatic awareness develops earlier than the processing capacity needed to deploy it under time pressure, and that the two require different kinds of practice. The pattern across speech acts points the same way: apologies and greetings, which are largely formulaic, were performed well, while refusals and disagreements, which require several coordinated moves and continuous assessment of the interlocutor, were weakest.

Pedagogically, three implications follow. First, pragmatics should be taught explicitly rather than left to be absorbed. Learners in this study reported almost no direct instruction in how to soften a refusal or disagree politely, and their performance reflected that absence. Second, instruction should move from awareness to production: noticing activities and contrastive analysis need to be followed by repeated, time-pressured practice so that appropriate forms become available in real conversation. Third, speaking assessment should include appropriateness as an explicit criterion. As long as rubrics

reward fluency and accuracy alone, learners have no reason to attend to the dimension in which they are weakest.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Several limitations should be noted. First, the participants came from one programme at one institution and shared a single first language, so both the difficulty ranking and the transfer patterns may differ in other settings. Second, role-play elicits performance in a controlled situation and cannot fully represent spontaneous interaction; some of the directness recorded here may be an artefact of the task rather than of the learners' competence. Third, the study was cross-sectional and therefore describes a state rather than a developmental path. Fourth, no instructional treatment was administered, so the study identifies needs without testing a remedy. Future research could combine role-play with naturalistic recordings, follow learners longitudinally across several semesters, test the effect of explicit pragmatic instruction on the speech acts identified as weakest here, and examine how far pragmatic gains transfer from the classroom to authentic interaction.

D. Conclusion

This study examined pragmatic competence in EFL learners' oral communication. The findings showed that learners demonstrated moderate pragmatic competence. They were generally able to express basic communicative intentions, but they struggled with contextual appropriateness, indirect requests, refusals, disagreements, and sociopragmatic adjustment. Learners scored higher on pragmatic judgment than oral role-play performance, indicating a gap between recognizing appropriate language and producing it spontaneously. Speech act analysis revealed that apologies and clarification requests were performed more successfully than refusals, requests, and disagreements. Politeness analysis showed that learners overused direct strategies and underused negative politeness and indirect strategies. The major challenges included limited pragmatic input, first-language transfer, grammar-focused learning history, low metapragmatic awareness, and speaking anxiety. The study concludes that pragmatic competence should be explicitly integrated into EFL speaking instruction. Teachers need to provide authentic models, speech act practice, context analysis, role-play, metapragmatic feedback, and intercultural reflection. Future research should examine longitudinal pragmatic development, compare proficiency levels, investigate digital pragmatic learning resources, and explore teacher readiness to teach pragmatics in EFL classrooms.

Declaration of AI-Assisted Technologies

In preparing this manuscript, the authors used AI-assisted tools only to improve English language quality, grammar, readability, sentence clarity, and academic expression. The AI tools were not used to generate research data, conduct data analysis, produce findings, or draw conclusions. All conceptual arguments, data interpretation, methodological decisions, and scholarly conclusions remain the full responsibility of the authors. The authors carefully reviewed, edited, and verified all AI-assisted outputs to ensure the accuracy, integrity, and originality of the final manuscript.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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