



ESP Learners' Attitudes Towards the Moodle Virtual Learning Environment

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Abstract

The incorporation of technology plays a key role in teaching and learning language skills. The integration of technology provides several opportunities for both language learners and teachers such as providing an inclusive learning environment, enabling learners to have access to various resources, and practicing language in a different way. This research investigates the attitudes of ESP learners in the context of maritime English through Moodle virtual learning platform. The study analyzes three factors such as the customization of Moodle platform to meet learners' needs as ESP learners, critical skills development of learners, and how this platform enhances interaction among learners. A questionnaire was used by the researcher to gather data from the participants using a quantitative approach. The results showed that Moodle has great potential for customization of ESP sources due to its various features and learners can easily have access to the course contents and ESP teachers can design their courses on this platform effectively. The findings of the study also showed that learners could improve their critical thing when dealing with the course content. The platform also provides high interaction among learners and learners with teacher. Nevertheless, educators and instructional designers must consider time constraints, inadequate resources, technical difficulties, and unfamiliarity with the platform. These findings present valuable perspectives for improving ESP courses that fulfill student needs and transform their perspectives on education.

Keywords: Online learning; virtual environment; English for Specific Purposes; Moodle; Maritime English

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INTRODUCTION

The increasing popularity of online learning platforms, particularly the dominance of English as the most widely spoken language, has affected people's ability to acquire new language skills. The use of modern technology has stimulated student engagement and motivation, causing a significant transformation in English education. As our globe continues to become increasingly interconnected, virtual worlds and social networks offer a valuable sharing space for people from diverse countries to interact. Online platforms can be useful for educational purposes because they provide an environment in which different educational stakeholders, including teachers and students, can benefit in different ways.

The study by Tsai (2016) investigated technology's impact on social connections. According to his study, the internet and social media have transformed how we communicate and live. Social media offers a platform for linking individuals including friends, family, colleagues, and people from diverse countries. His research reveals that social networks are advanced communication technologies that support virtual collaboration between educators and learners, ultimately advancing educational goals.

According to Means et al. (2010), online learning, a form of distance learning, includes a range of technologies such as distance learning, educational television and video conferencing. The study says policymakers view online education favorably because of its cost-effectiveness compared to traditional face-to-face instruction. Virtual learning is not only widely used in everyday interaction, but also for language acquisition.

In a similar study, Cavus (2006) states that web-based platforms can effectively help in planning, implementing and monitoring learning processes. Open-source software allows users to customize a program to suit their needs and solve specific difficulties, making it adaptable for a range of uses.

For various reasons, it would make sense to analyze the potential of using the online learning platform Moodle. Before implementation, educators and course developers must ensure that learners are actively involved in the learning process to maximize the benefits of Moodle and receive effective reviews from both instructors and learners. This can lead to better outcomes for language learners.

By examining students' perspectives on Moodle, teachers can gain additional insights into the advantages, disadvantages and effectiveness of digitally supported language learning in general. Design professionals can then create more effective and user-friendly interfaces. It is crucial to analyze how students interpret technology and adapt it to their needs. Understanding learners' views on Moodle can influence institutional policy and decision-making, including decisions about how to use online platforms such as Moodle to meet learners' needs.

This study examined the attitude of 30 Iranian sailors as ESP learners towards Moodle as a virtual learning platform for practicing maritime English communication skills. The researchers used a questionnaire that examined three factors, including the adaptation of Moodle to ESP course content, learners' critical thinking when using this platform to practice maritime English, and how this platform improves interaction between learners and so on influences the learning process. To meet the objectives of this study, the researchers formulated the following research question: How do ESP students perceive Moodle when used as a virtual learning platform for Maritime English in an EFL environment?

Literature Review

English for Specific Purposes (ESP)

Carver (1983) identified authentic content, goal-oriented focus, and self-direction as essential characteristics of an ESP course. The course contains up-to-date information tailored to the target group. Student learning is most effective when working toward concrete goals, whether stated or implied. Therefore, learners benefit significantly from direct interaction with the material itself to become familiar with it. It is expected to spread quickly and widely. The process can be implemented through a curriculum that directly presents real-world scenarios to learners, perhaps through the use of bilingual written materials.

As Carver (1983) notes, textbooks serve as teaching tools for students, providing guidance for initial implementation and supporting the development of self-assessment techniques. Teachers can use the materials in traditional methods including language analysis,

comprehension, interpretation, substitution exercises and repetition exercises. It is easier for beginners to view speech segments as holophrases and to be intentional about language acquisition.

Using an authentic content strategy, as suggested by Carver (1983), requires using the learner's native language to convey the meaning of the text and offering explanations that facilitate their understanding. Equivalent activities may consist of tailored activities, tables and charts or short essays for educational purposes. The purpose and specificity characteristics essential to ESP are often overlooked when using the authentic content method, despite its popularity.

Part of the latest version of the ESP feature is self-monitoring, because the goal of ESP is to turn learners into language users. To become a user, exposure to language is crucial. Although individuals may not have access to teachers outside of traditional educational settings such as schools or colleges, they can still receive support from a variety of sources to promote independent learning. This shows how ESP strives to promote independence and self-determination. Two interrelated aspects of self-regulation are essential: First, students need a certain degree of autonomy in deciding when, what and how they learn. Second, teachers help teach students learning methods by informing them about the resources available and helping them develop individual learning strategies.

Maritime English

According to Valle (2012), maritime English refers to the language used by seafarers both on board ships and in ports. It is also used by professionals in the shipping and shipbuilding industries. Maritime English includes five subcategories, each of which serves a specific function in the maritime environment: shipbuilding, marine engineering, maritime law, trade and navigation. Additionally, it is used for legal and commercial matters. Undoubtedly, maritime English is the language used for navigation and communication at sea. The linguistic and conceptual aspects of English for maritime trade and maritime law show similarities.

The special part of maritime English called marine engineering and shipping English refers to the language used by shipping professionals, ship designers, shipbuilders, ship surveyors and other technical personnel responsible for the systems and construction, operation and maintenance of ships engines and equipment as well as the construction and inspection of ships.

Written communication is more important than oral communication in a business context. Therefore, knowledge of English is crucial as reports, specifications, manuals and technical documents are often written and interpreted by marine engineers and ship designers in English. As Bocanegra-Valle (2012) notes, when discussing transportation technology there are linguistic and discursive features specific to technical English.

Maritime English as a Global Language and Lingua Franca

Many people assume that only maritime English is spoken at sea. However, life at sea has encouraged the widespread use of maritime English, which promotes clear communication between crew members, between ship and shore, and between crew and passengers. The consequences of communications failures can result in financial losses, environmental damage and loss of life. The International Maritime Organization (IMO) and other organizations have been pioneers in standardizing the terminology and expressions used at sea. They taught English to sailors and developed literature on the subject. The long history of English use in

various fields, including finance, business and administration, greatly simplifies its function as a universal language at sea (Demydenko, 2012).

Maritime English as an Operational Language

It is possible to explain the unique features of the English language used in the field of naval operations from a theoretical and practical point of view. Operative language demonstrates operational behavior based on the speaker's purpose and the listener's interpretation. Empirical definitions are based on data obtained from observations. To avoid misunderstandings and errors, the Standard Marine Communication Phrases (SMCPs) are a highly standardized set of safety language that is clear, unambiguous and concise. SMCPs, based on conventions or agreements, include a range of terminology that denotes various entities, ideas, activities and procedures. The basis for this area is conventionalism, as established by the IMO and recognized worldwide for maritime use (Demydenko, 2012).

As Ahmed (2018) notes, seafarers and other naval personnel in the port and shipping industry use maritime English. People working in this profession are regularly affected by reports of major accidents at sea. According to this study, accidents are often due to communication and teamwork problems. Therefore, there is a close connection between knowledge of English and safety at sea. When sailors act responsibly, misunderstandings are almost completely prevented. English can be used for both general and maritime purposes, as the latter is derived from the former. To create a coherent curriculum for learners, it is important to assess how general and maritime English is taught and acquired. Programs such as English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and English for Specific Purposes (ESP) train students in standard and maritime English. Learners should be introduced to maritime English when they reach a certain level. The use of both native and non-native learning techniques ensures that learners maintain language proficiency throughout their lives and not just in an educational setting (Ahmmed, 2018).

Context of the study

The Ports and Maritime Organization manages the ports and maritime affairs in Iran. Tehran hosts the organization's headquarters, while Iranian ports in various cities operate under its supervision. Some employees of specialized maritime departments are required to learn maritime English due to the demands of their duties. Chabahar Port is one of Iran's strategic ports and is nicknamed the "Gate of Nations". Several departments of the General Administration of Ports and Maritime Affairs in Chabahar Port require specialized maritime English to function effectively. These departments include the Chabahar Port Maritime Search and Rescue Center, the Chabahar Radio Station and the Vessel Traffic Services. The purpose of this study is to help seafarers working in these departments.

Moodle as a Virtual Learning Platform

Based on social constructivism, a modular, object-oriented, dynamic learning environment called Moodle was developed. This platform provides both teachers and students with the opportunity to interact and collaborate online (Tang, 2013). With Moodle's learning management system, teachers can easily create a private website for dynamic courses, promoting unlimited learning opportunities from anywhere, anytime.

Moodle is considered an all-in-one platform as it offers a comprehensive learning environment that includes all the necessary features. It is versatile and customizable to any extent. In particular, the platform is characterized by robustness, security and data protection. It allows teachers and students to easily access it from any location. In addition, Moodle offers

a wide range of educational resources and was explicitly designed for global learning. The software's open source design ensures that it is reliable, secure, adaptable and scalable to meet the needs of users at all levels. In addition, the software conforms to common universal interoperability guidelines, allowing it to work on various cross-browser platforms, integrate with modern operating systems, and provide interfaces for mobile devices. Over 60% of higher education institutions currently use Moodle, indicating a significant increase in global usage (Ally, 2022).

Some Studies about Moodle

According to a study by Al Hamads (2022) on Jordanian educators, perceptions of Moodle, a learning management system, are influenced by such factors as influence, effort expectation, and performance expectation. The study examined the use and perception of Moodle among Jordanian teachers and data was collected through surveys. According to this study, effectively integrating Moodle into the educational process requires an understanding of its impact, expected effort and expected results. Therefore, it is imperative to examine the impact, effort, and outcomes of Moodle integration.

The study by Balqa (2022) found that incorporating Moodle into lessons helps reduce stress and provide emotional support to learners. The study, conducted with 75 university students, also showed positive effects of the Moodle platform on students' well-being.

Another study by Dolenc et al. (2022) examined 290 college professors' perceptions of online learning during the pandemic. The results showed that Microsoft Teams was the most used online platform during the pandemic, while Moodle and email use only increased slightly. Still, once campus reopened, most teachers returned to their traditional in-person teaching methods. This study has highlighted the limitations of online learning. It was also suggested that Microsoft Teams could be a useful addition to traditional teaching. More research is needed to explore how technology can improve education. Educators and developers should explore methods for integrating online and in-person instruction for optimal results.

The study by Guler and Ozden (2022) examined students' and educators' perceptions of using Moodle/Office365 for school assignments. One hundred and six people attended two courses: "Introduction to Computers" and "Computers for Law". The majority of lecturers and learners favored Moodle because they found it easy to use. The study showed that implementing Moodle increased students' motivation for class work. Given the changing pace of technology, further study is needed on what best helps students learn and how to use technology creatively in the classroom. This allows us to develop more interesting and useful learning methods for students.

Raman et al. (2022) conducted a quantitative study to examine the influence of intrinsic motivational factors, including autonomy, competence and relatedness, as well as extended UTAUT traits, on behavioral intention and behavioral use of Moodle in blended learning. The researchers distributed questionnaires to 370 graduate students at Utara University in Malaysia to collect data. The study suggests that incorporating intrinsic motivational factors, including presenting opportunities for autonomy and competence, can improve students' engagement with Moodle in blended learning environments. These insights may prove useful for educators and organizations looking to increase adoption and usage of LMSs like Moodle.

Although Moodle has been used in various educational institutions, further research is needed. Investigating the suitability of the educational resources available on Moodle, students' interactions during the course and their reflections on the learning experience are the focus of this study. These three elements require further research within the Moodle platform, building

on previous studies in this area. Therefore, the researcher conducted this study with the aim of gaining further insights into the meaning of Moodle and understanding the virtual environment of Moodle. This will allow future studies to determine the effectiveness and suitability of the Moodle platform for educational purposes.

Methodology

Research Design

This study used a descriptive quantitative approach to examine ESP learners' perceptions of learning in a virtual environment. The researcher used a questionnaire survey to collect data. The questionnaire was developed based on three factors: platform adaptability for maritime ESP courses, critical thinking and interactivity.

Participants

The participants of this study were 30 employees of Chabahar Port who worked in various maritime sectors and needed to learn English for their professional purposes. The employees came from search and rescue departments, Chabahar radio station, ship traffic control, etc. The course duration was five weeks. The principal investigator collected data through a survey at the end of the course.

The procedure of the study

This research took place at a private language school in Chabahar, Iran, where seafarers enrolled in the course to improve their English skills due to the demands of their work. The course instructor, the lead author of this study, used selected portions of the Standard Marine Communication Phrases (SMCP) as the syllabus. The class discussions were clearly classified and cataloged in different sections of the Moodle learning management system. Participants were given the opportunity to practice all coursework with their colleagues in the workplace.

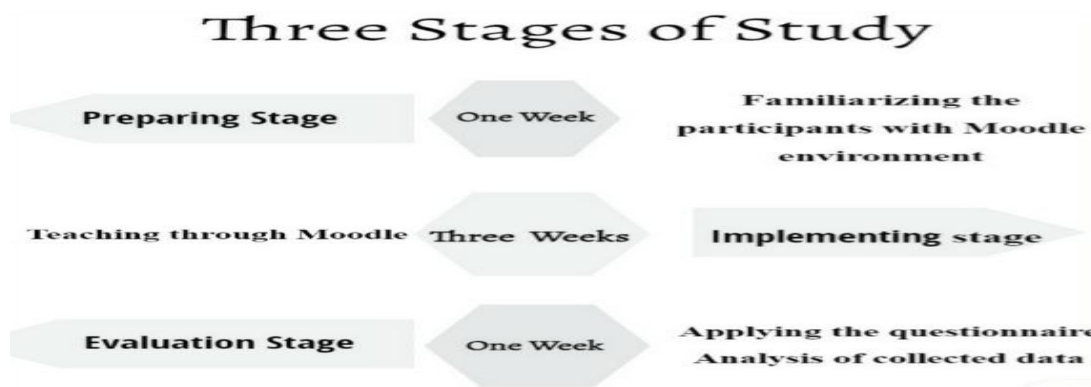


Figure 1: Three stages of the study

The course lasted for a period of five weeks divided into three phases: preparation, delivery, and assessment. Figure 1 provides a visual representation of the course phases. In the preparation phase lasting one week, participants received a thorough orientation on the Moodle virtual environment and installed the Moodle application on their smartphones to make course content easily accessible. The delivery phase consisted of nine sessions conducted over three weeks, followed by distribution of a questionnaire to learners in order to analyze their perceptions during the assessment phase. The researchers used SPSS for descriptive data analysis to analyze the data collected through the questionnaire survey.

Results

The results of the questionnaire collected students' views on the adaptability of the Moodle platform for adapting ESP courses, the ability to improve learners' critical thinking skills when using this platform, and learners' interaction. The results showed that Moodle can serve as a great virtual platform for designing ESP courses, which has the potential to improve the critical thinking of its users when practicing course content and facilitates learner-learner interaction with teachers due to its collaborative features. Examining the survey results provides a comprehensive understanding of the pros and cons of Moodle as a learning management system and provides useful insights for educators looking to improve their virtual-based teaching strategies.

Platform Adaptability

The Moodle survey adaptability score measures the degree to which course adaptation is related to students' professional practice. The four statements presented in Table 1 illustrate the relevance factor, the mean of each statement, the overall mean of the four statements, and a scale from one to five to indicate the degree of connection between the study and the participants' professional practice on their attitudes.

Table 1

Adaptability (Statements 1-4)

Relevance	Mean	Total Mean	Scales (1 to 5)	N
1-My learning focused on issues that interested me.	4.07	4.43	1 – Almost Never	15
2- What I learned was important for my occupation.	4.73		2 - Seldom	
3- I learned how to improve my occupation.	4.33		3 - Sometimes	
4- What I learned connected well with my occupation.	4.60		4 - Often	
			5 -Almost Always	

Table 1 shows the results of the survey on how students perceived the materials provided with Moodle and how they related to professional practice. Each question received an average score of more than 4, meaning the course was tailored to the needs of seafarers. The overall average shows that most students found the course content relevant to their work at sea. The analysis of the four adaptability statements shows that learners have a positive attitude towards the learning materials selected from the SMCP published by the International Maritime Organization (IMO). From this, we can conclude that Moodle's virtual environment can be adapted for designing online ESP courses that are relevant to learners' careers.

Learners' Critical Thinking

Students' views on the impact of Moodle on their reflective thinking are measured using the reflective thinking factor of the questionnaire. The mean of each statement and the overall mean of the four statements are shown in Table 2. The five scales show the extent to which Moodle influenced students' reflective thinking during this online course.

Table 02

Critical thinking (Statements 5 - 8)

Interactivity	Mean	Total Mean	Scales (1 to 5)	N
5-I thought critically about how I learned.	3.13	3.15	1 - Almost never	15
6-I thought critically about my ideas.	3.27		2 - Seldom	
7-I thought critically about other students' ideas.	3.20		3 - Sometimes	
8-I thought critically about ideas in the readings.	3.00		4 - Often	
			5 -Almost Always	

The second survey factor focused on students' critical thinking during the Moodle online course. Participants were asked whether the e-learning course developed their critical thinking skills. Table 2 shows an overall mean of 3.15, indicating that most students challenged different approaches to learning. Despite the positive review, educators can use this factor to encourage deeper thinking and reasoning in students. Critical thinking requires discipline. In summary, the online learning platform Moodle can provide students with an objective and tailored learning environment that reflects their learning style. In summary, the online learning platform Moodle can provide students with an objective and tailored learning environment that facilitates the analysis and improvement of critical and reflective thinking skills. Using Moodle, students can examine and objectively evaluate peer learning ideas.

Learners' Interaction

The interactivity factor of the questionnaire assessed students' interaction via the Moodle website. The average reflects the level of interaction between students during the course. The students were invited to exchange ideas and comment. The average reflects the level of interaction between students during the course. Table 3 shows the minimum and maximum interactions presented in the first and last scales, respectively.

Table 3

Interactivity (Statements 9 - 12)

Interactivity	Mean	Total Mean	Scales (1 to 5)	N
9-I explained my ideas to other students.	2.87	3.05	1 - Almost never	15
10-I asked other students to explain their ideas.	3.13		2 - Seldom	
11-other students asked me to explain my ideas.	2.73		3 - Sometimes	
12 other students responded to my ideas.	3.47		4 - Often	
			5 -Almost Always	

The overall mean of 3.05 indicates occasional student interaction. Students exchanged ideas through an online course, discussions in the Moodle virtual learning forum and chat rooms using Moodle Mobile. The interactivity factor on the Moodle platform improves the learning process by enriching students' experiences. The students benefit from collaboration and participation in common tasks, which allows them to use each other's strengths.

Discussion

This study analyzed three factors to understand students' attitudes towards the Moodle learning environment: 1) customization of the course and its relevance to learners' professional requirements, 2) learners' critical thinking, and 3) their interaction.

The results of the questionnaire adaptation factor showed that this e-learning course on the Moodle platform met the participants' career goals. The high relevance of the course content for the students' professional fields led to positive evaluations of the first factor. After analyzing the second-factor questionnaire, Moodle supported students' critical thinking. Consequently, students cultivated their learning styles by improving their critical thinking skills. In addition, they encouraged each other by imparting challenges aimed at personal and academic development. The results also showed that students were able to interact effectively on this platform.

The study by Kok (2008) shows the willingness of teachers and students to integrate Moodle into teaching and learning methods. While this study shows the benefits of using Moodle as an effective tool, it also highlights the need to train learners on how to use Moodle efficiently to save time. Familiarizing students with the features of the Moodle platform before the course may lead to better results, as this is implemented as a preparation phase in the current study.

To integrate Moodle into teaching and learning practices, it is important to consider its social perspective as well as effort expectancy and performance expectancy, as highlighted in the study by Al-Hamads (2022). The current study examines the interaction ability of Moodle users and is positive. It shows that, when used effectively, Moodle has the potential to encourage students to actively participate in the learning process through interaction with their fellow students.

It is crucial to investigate the viewpoints of various stakeholders, mainly teachers and students, in incorporating online platforms such as Moodle in educational setting. The study by Dolenc, Sorgo, and Virtic (2022) examined educators' perceptions of the limitations and challenges of Moodle. The results showed doubts about the effectiveness of online learning, which is in contrast to the results of the current study that examined learners' views on the use of Moodle. It is possible that teachers and students have different perspectives and it would be great to include both groups of participants in the same study.

It is crucial to examine the factors that influence students' motivation and engagement when using Moodle. The study by Raman, Thannimalai, Rathakrishnan, and Ismail (2022) highlights the role of intrinsic motivators such as autonomy, competence, and relatedness that impact students' intention to use Moodle for learning purposes. The above study is in line with our current study, which shows the positive effects of the virtual learning platform Moodle from different perspectives.

Conclusion

The aim of this study was to analyze the attitudes of some ESP learners towards the Moodle platform in an EFL context. The focus of this study was on three factors such as the adaptability and customization of the Moodle platform for ESP courses, its potential to improve learners' critical thinking skills, and providing a supportive space for interaction between learners. The results showed that Moodle's space can be effectively used for the design and delivery of ESP courses tailored to the needs of learners, particularly ESP learners in the maritime context.

Most students confirmed the relevance of the course materials for maritime work. The adaptability factor analysis showed learners' positive attitude towards the learning materials

released by SMCP. The results indicate that students' success is higher when the Moodle online course is closely aligned with their professional needs.

Critical thinking was the second factor that students mentioned while participating in the Moodle online course. The results of the study indicate that some learners critically evaluated learning concepts. In summary, Moodle's online learning platform can provide learners with an efficient environment that suits their learning style and allows them to analyze others' learning styles to improve their critical and reflective thinking.

The third questionnaire factor aimed to assess students' interactions in the online environment of Moodle. The survey results showed that students interacted with each other in different ways. They engaged as colleagues and discussed online courses in realistic scenarios. They also used forum discussions and chat rooms via the virtual learning platform Moodle. Based on the idea that students' interactivity can improve their educational experiences, it follows that the interactivity factor on the Moodle platform can improve the learning process. Through shared tasks, students can benefit from each other's strengths.

Using a virtual platform like Moodle can be challenging for both teachers and students. In addition, some students were unfamiliar with Moodle and needed help. The students then became more familiar with the Moodle virtual environment during the preparation phase. This phase can be time-consuming depending on the digital language level of the learners. Another disadvantage of using virtual environments is the lack of motivation of certain learners. One possible solution is to develop a curriculum that is responsive to students' needs and interests. In summary, the Moodle virtual environment offers enormous potential for ESP teachers to create courses based on learners' needs. Moodle enables students to communicate effectively and develop their reflective thinking skills throughout the course.

Pedagogical Implications

First, the use of technology to teach English online has a significant impact on educators. The virtual learning platform Moodle equips online teachers with the tools they need to deliver an effective course. Teachers have the opportunity to monitor their students' progress throughout the course. Moodle offers various features including interactions, quizzes, polls, assignments, forum discussions, and group chats that simplify the online teaching process for educators. One can easily create a free Moodle website that offers multiple courses for learners with different needs.

Another relevant point is that ESP courses such as Maritime English are integrated into the curricula of academic institutions. There, university teachers or professors can use the Moodle platform to give students assignments or tests as part of their curriculum. to offer virtual classroom experiences as a replacement for traditional face-to-face teaching.

As the study shows, some people find it difficult to attend a face-to-face course at a specific place and time. Third, this study is relevant for individuals who are unable to physically attend classes. Consequently, the Moodle platform presents itself as a viable replacement for traditional classroom environments, especially for those who cannot attend face-to-face classes.

Author Contributions

The authorship are: Muhammad Azim Arbabi: MAA, Deyuan He: DH, D.G. E. Ho: D.G.E.H Conceptualization, MAA; methodology, MAA; validation, MAA, DH, DGEH; formal analysis, MAA; investigation, MAA; resources, MAA; data curation, MAA; writing – original draft preparation, MAA; writing – review and editing, MAA, DH, DGEH; supervision, MAA; project administration, MAA. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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Conflict of interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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