

Original article

Methodological alternative for developing listening comprehension in english among medical students

Alternativa metodológica para desarrollar la comprensión auditiva en inglés en estudiantes de medicina

Alternativa metodológica para desenvolver a compreensão auditiva em inglês em estudantes de medicina

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Abstract

Mastery of a foreign language is a necessity in contemporary society. The objective of this work was to design a methodological alternative that contributes to the development of listening



comprehension in A2-level students at the Julio Trigo López Faculty of Medical Sciences, University of Medical Sciences of Havana. A descriptive study was conducted, applying both theoretical and empirical methods. Empirical investigations included an entrance test and a survey of the participants. The sample consisted of a total of 153 fourth-year medical students. The proposal helped improve their listening skills. After the placement exam, which showed a 59.8% result, instruments were used to understand psychological, pedagogical, and didactic aspects, which were vital in the design of the proposal. Conclusions: Although the research cannot show its final results as it is still in the implementation phase, it can be said that the methodological alternative promoted the use of effective strategies to achieve the proposed objective. In the long term, these strategies will validate the proposal and provide a solution to the identified problem.

Key words: linguistic competencies, English language teaching, reproductive skills, teaching-learning process.

Resumen

El dominio de un idioma extranjero es una necesidad en la sociedad contemporánea. El objetivo del presente trabajo consistió en diseñar una alternativa metodológica que contribuya al desarrollo de la comprensión auditiva en estudiantes del nivel A2, en la Facultad de Ciencias Médicas Julio Trigo López, Universidad de Ciencias Médicas de La Habana. Se realizó un estudio descriptivo, que aplicó métodos teóricos y empíricos. Para las indagaciones empíricas se aplicaron una prueba de entrada y una encuesta a los participantes. La muestra estuvo integrada por un total de 153 estudiantes del 4.º año de la carrera de medicina. La propuesta ayudó a mejorar la habilidad auditiva en ellos. Después de la aplicación del examen de colocación, que reflejó un 59,8 %, se emplearon instrumentos que permitieron conocer aspectos psicológicos, pedagógicos y didácticos; los cuales fueron vitales en el diseño de la propuesta. Aun cuando la investigación no puede mostrar sus resultados finales al estar en vías de implementación; puede decirse que, la alternativa metodológica propició la utilización de estrategias acertadas para el logro del objetivo propuesto; las cuales, a largo plazo, validarán la propuesta que dará solución al problema diagnosticado.



Palabras claves: competencias lingüísticas, enseñanza del idioma inglés, habilidades reproductivas, proceso enseñanza aprendizaje.

Resumo

O domínio de uma língua estrangeira é uma necessidade da sociedade contemporânea. O objetivo deste trabalho foi desenhar uma alternativa metodológica que contribuísse para o desenvolvimento da compreensão auditiva em alunos de nível A2, na Faculdade de Ciências Médicas Julio Trigo López, da Universidade de Ciências Médicas de La Havana. Foi realizado um estudo descritivo, que aplicou métodos teóricos e empíricos. Para a parte empírica, foram aplicados um teste de admissão e uma enquete para os participantes. A amostra foi constituída por um total de 153 alunos do 4º ano do curso de medicina. A proposta ajudou a melhorar sua capacidade auditiva. Depois da aplicação do exame de nivelamento, que refletiu 59,8 %, foram utilizados instrumentos que permitissem conhecer aspectos psicológicos, pedagógicos e didáticos, os quais foram vitais na concepção da proposta. Embora a pesquisa não pudesse mostrar seus resultados finais, pois está em processo de implementação, pode-se dizer que a alternativa metodológica levou ao uso de estratégias bem-sucedidas para atingir o objetivo proposto; que, a longo prazo, dará validade à proposta e se mostra promissor para resolver o problema diagnosticado.

Palavras-chave: competências linguísticas, ensino de inglês, habilidades reprodutivas, processo de ensino-aprendizagem.

Introduction

English is considered the universal language, which is why its learning is essential for every professional. Additionally, knowledge of English enables individuals to engage with the culture of other countries, their values, beliefs, customs, and ways of life, in a general sense.

Since 1959, the Cuban education system has been creating and refining its methods and policies related to increasing the knowledge of its citizens. One of the prioritized measures is the teaching



of the English language. It has been included in all curricula from the 3rd grade onwards and continues through higher education. Teaching English is highly beneficial for the holistic development of students and the skills they will need in the future.

As part of the ongoing improvement of higher education in Cuba, university students are required to demonstrate a solid proficiency in the English language, with an A2 level as a graduation requirement, according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. The primary objective is to graduate highly qualified professionals in their respective fields or specialties.

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages establishes guidelines for describing students' achievements in foreign languages across Europe and increasingly in other countries as well. Its objective is to provide teaching, learning, and assessment methods that apply to all languages in Europe. It takes into account competencies in knowledge, skills, and existential competencies, particularly communicative, linguistic, sociolinguistic, and pragmatic competencies (Council of Europe, 2020).

This framework categorizes students into six broad levels (A1, A2, B1, B2, C1, C2). For each level, it describes what students should be able to achieve in the skills of reading comprehension, *listening comprehension*, and written and oral communication. Given that the topic of the foregoing research is the development of listening comprehension skills at the A2 level among some descriptors are:

- Can understand enough to be able to meet specific needs; the provided speech is clear and articulated slowly.
- Can understand phrases and expressions related to areas of immediate priority (e.g., very basic personal and family information, shopping, local geography, and jobs); the provided speech is clear and articulated slowly.
- Can generally identify the topic of discussion around them when it is conducted clearly and articulated slowly.



- Can recognize when the speaker agrees or disagrees in a conversation conducted clearly and articulated slowly.
- Can follow a short summary with simple social exchanges, conducted very clearly and articulated slowly.
- Can follow a simple and well-structured presentation, illustrated with slides, concrete
 examples, or diagrams, conducted clearly and articulated slowly with repetition, and the
 topic must be familiar.
- Can understand the summary of simple, predictable information.
- Can grasp the main idea in short and simple messages and announcements.
- Can understand simple directions related to how to get from X to Y walking or by means of transportation.
- Can understand basic instructions related to hours, dates, numbers, etc., routine tasks, and assignments.
- Can understand and extract essential information from short audio clips about passages related to predictable daily topics.
- Can extract important information from short radio broadcasts, such as weather reports, concert or sports announcements, provided by people who speak clearly.
- Can understand significant aspects of a story and follow its plot, which should be narrated clearly and slowly. (Council of Europe, 2018)

The previous descriptors represent the ideal solution, but the current situation is that students arrive at universities with limited prior knowledge, and listening comprehension is a weakened skill. Some of the causes include:

- Lack of motivation and self-directed learning in listening development activities due to gaps in previous education.
- Inadequate teaching strategies due to a shortage of technological resources.
- Issues with the quality of audio materials and the school environment.
- Insufficient qualified personnel (graduates or language teaching specialists) in primary, secondary, and pre-university education.
- Prioritization of productive skills.



• Inadequate class hours allocated to the subject in previous education levels.

For all these reasons, the objective of this research was to design a methodological alternative that contributes to the development of listening comprehension skills in A2-level students at the Julio Trigo López Faculty of Medical Sciences, University of Medical Sciences of Havana.

Materials and Methods

A descriptive study was conducted with a total of 153 fourth-year medical students from the Julio Trigo López Faculty of Medical Sciences, University of Medical Sciences of Havana, Cuba. The entire population (100%) was included in the study. The data collection process employed both theoretical and empirical methods. In the theoretical phase, analytical-synthetic, historical-logical, and documentary analysis methods were used. These methods served to respectively establish the foundation and develop the proposed methodological alternative, understand the historical context of the study object, and establish the reference framework for the research. Regarding the empirical methods, data was collected through a survey and an entrance test administered to the students. The study was conducted between March and May of 2023.

The English language certification exam, which is administered to medical students, was used as the entry test for this research. It was conducted over two consecutive days. Initially, a written certification exam was administered, covering listening comprehension, reading, and written production. The following day, the oral skills exam (interview and monologue) was conducted to place students into proficiency levels, diagnose their language skills, and determine their communicative abilities in English.

Each skill was assessed according to the levels established in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (with adaptations for the Cuban context), taking into account the descriptors for each skill. Below is a brief description of what each exam for the different skills entailed:



- *Listening Comprehension*: The exam had a duration of 35 minutes and was divided into three sections with a total of 22 items. Each section included two playbacks of the recording. Students were required to answer questions while listening to the recording.
- Reading Comprehension: The exam had a duration of 60 minutes and was divided into four parts with a total of 21 items. Students were required to carefully read the instructions and questions before providing their responses. This format allowed for a thorough evaluation of their reading comprehension skills in English.
- The key followed for reproductive skills was: less than 5 correct items is scored as no level; 5 to 8 correct items is scored as A1; 9 to 14 correct items is scored as A2; and more than 15 correct items is scored as B1.
- Written Production: The exam had a duration of 30 minutes and consisted of a task where students were required to write a composition of 100 words. During the review process, several descriptors were considered, including the fulfillment of the task, coherence, cohesion, vocabulary usage, grammar, and spelling. These criteria were used to assess the quality and proficiency of the students' written production in English.
- *Oral production*: Time between 10 and 12 minutes per student. The panels were composed of two teachers. Only one of the panel members (interlocutor) interacted with the student. The other took notes related to the evaluation and proposed a grade. The first part of the exam was a 5-minute interview (to evaluate oral interaction); and the second part is a 1 to 2-minute monologue by the examinee (to evaluate oral production), based on a card with a topic. The student has one minute to prepare before starting the monologue.

To award the grade, the following descriptors were taken into account: interaction, coherence and fluency, vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation.

Additionally, a questionnaire was designed and applied to the students in order to determine:

- Students' criteria about the test.
- Students' assessment of the knowledge acquired in previous years.
- The skill they found most difficult.
- Suggestions for other exams

Results and Discussion

Listening comprehension holds a significant place in language learning as one of the four essential skills in language acquisition. While other skills such as reading comprehension, oral expression, and writing are crucial for the development of language proficiency, listening stimulates language knowledge as the receptive skill that initially develops in humans. Through listening, it becomes easier to enhance other skills and gain confidence.

Over the years, the development of listening skills has been a significant subject of study for various authors such as Richards (2008), Galán (2015), and Cruz (2017). The authors of this research have attempted to summarize some of their ideas to support the topic under analysis in the current work.

Analyzing the theoretical background and the importance of listening skills, authors like Antich (1975), Wajnryb (1990), and Acosta (1997) consider that a person has achieved or developed listening skills when they can:

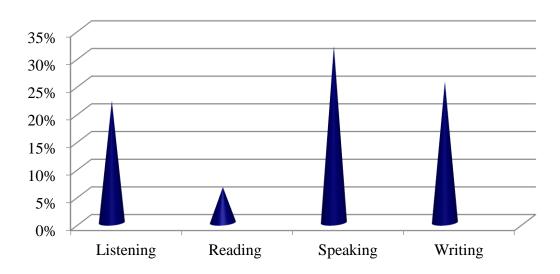
- Predict what people will talk about.
- Infer the meaning of unknown words or phrases.
- Use their own knowledge to understand.
- Recognize discourse markers.
- Interpret the inferred information.
- Interpret different intonation patterns and use accent, which initiates meaning and social context.

Description of the Current Situation

Out of a total enrollment of 153 students, 141 students took the exam, representing a 92.2% participation rate. Among them, 84 students passed, accounting for a 59.8% pass rate. The certification exam allowed for the assessment of the competency level achieved by students in four skills: listening comprehension, reading comprehension, written production, and oral expression (Figure 1).

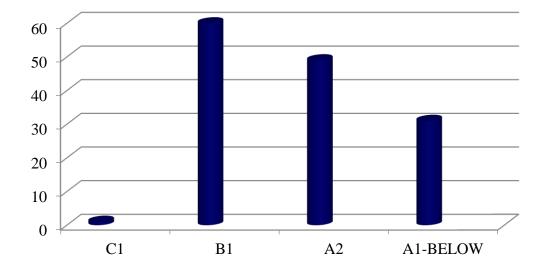


Figure 1
Results by skills



Regarding listening comprehension, it was found that only one student achieved a C1 level, validated by a certificate accredited by the University of Cambridge (Figure 2).

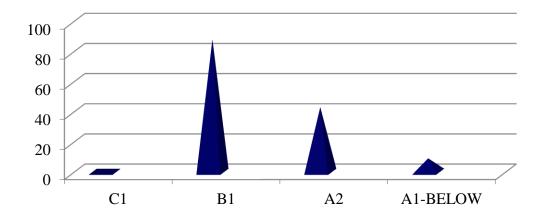
Figure 2
Listening Comprehension Results



In Figure 3, the results of the reading comprehension assessment are presented.

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Figure 3 *Reading Comprehension Results*



Concerning oral expression, it was observed that 32 students were at the A1-BELOW level (Figure 4).

Figure 4

Oral Expression Results

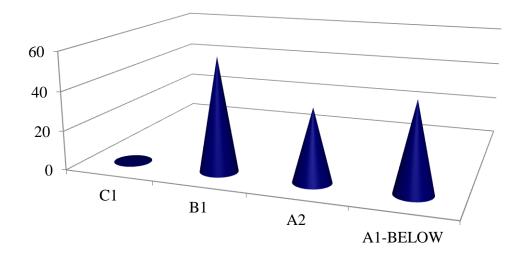
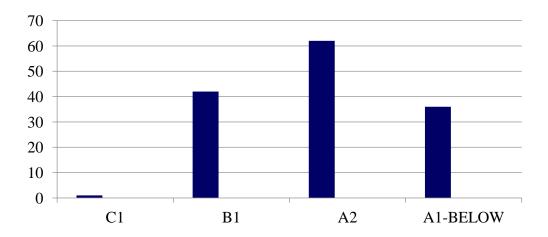


Figure 5 displays the proficiency levels in the writing skill.



Figure 5
Written Production Results



The placement exam revealed some deficiencies. For instance, in the written production, 36 students (25.5%) were placed at the A1 level, and thus did not pass this skill. The most common errors observed were:

- *Coherence-Cohesion*: Insufficient use of connectors to link ideas, which were expressed simply without a logical progression. Paragraphs were not properly delimited, and students did not follow the established structure for text composition. There were inconsistencies in coherence, such as the use of long sentences with insufficient punctuation.
- *Vocabulary*: Students demonstrated a limited basic vocabulary related to the topic at hand, and there was repetition of ideas.
- *Grammar*: Difficulties were evident in the use of the third person singular in the present simple tense, incorrect word order, and the use of simple, memorized syntactic structures.
- *Spelling:* Problems were observed with capitalization, punctuation marks, and spelling, including letter substitutions.

In *oral expression*, 13 students have no level, and 32 are at the A1 level, thus not achieving certification in this skill (31.9%). The most common errors observed were:

• *Interaction*: Lack of comprehension of the question, necessitating repetition or paraphrasing. Inability to sustain a conversation, with extremely short responses.



- *Coherence and Fluency*: Insufficient use of connectors to link ideas, not staying on topic. Use of pauses to search for words or phrases.
- *Vocabulary*: Limited vocabulary and occasional use of the native language.
- *Grammar*: Difficulties with the third person singular in the present simple tense, incorrect use of plurals in adjectives, misuse of grammatical structures like "to be" and "to have." Use of very basic grammatical patterns.
- *Pronunciation*: The influence of the native language was evident, primarily among students of Latin origin.

In the productive skill of *listening comprehension*, 9 students have no level, and 22 are at the A1 level, thus not achieving certification in this skill (22%). The causes align with what was explained in the problematic situation, primarily inadequate teaching strategies due to a lack of technological resources.

In the productive skill of *reading comprehension*, 1 student has no level, and 10 are at the A1 level, thus not achieving certification in this skill (6.4%).

A survey administered to 37.3% of the students involved allowed us to gather their opinions on the exam (Figure 6), their knowledge from previous years (Figure 7), and the skill they found most challenging (Figure 8).

Figure 6
Student's feedback on the exam

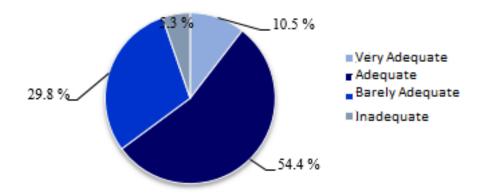




Figure 7Students' criteria on previous years' knowledge

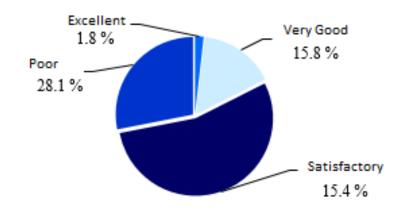
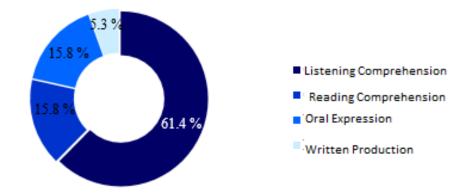


Figure 8

Most difficult skill, according to the students' criteria



Students were also asked to provide suggestions for future assessments. Below are the three skills that students identified as the most challenging, along with their suggestions:

Listening Comprehension:

- Repeat the audio three times.
- Ensure appropriate technological equipment like speakers.
- In audio clips, native English speakers should speak more slowly.
- Do not collect the exam immediately after playing the audio; provide at least 5 minutes for correction and at least 1.5 minutes between one audio and another to answer the questions.



- Train with listening exercises featuring various English accents, such as British, Australian,
 Canadian, etc.
- Ensure absolute silence and a calm environment during the playback of materials.

Reading Comprehension:

Provide more time.

Oral Expression:

• In the case of evaluating many students, divide the assessment into two sections (morning and afternoon) to reduce waiting times for students.

Other Suggestions:

- Allow students to retake only the skill in which they did not achieve the required level.
- Ensure that frequent, midterm, and final assessments have a similar format to the proficiency exam.
- Prepare students for this rigorous exam from the early years of their academic program.
- Provide more break time between the skills on the first day of the exam.
- Supply technological equipment for working on listening comprehension skills to the language department.
- Consider conducting the exam online.
- Provide students with feedback on their weaknesses to help them improve and attain certification.
- Exclude foreign students from the evaluation.

In order to provide a solution to the problematic situation posed, and taking into account the results of the placement test, a methodological alternative was designed with the objective of favoring work with the most difficult skill for students: listening comprehension.



Strategies for Effective Teaching of Listening Skills

Listening strategies are techniques or activities that directly contribute to listening performance. In recent years, researchers like Cevallos and Del Pino (2019), Abreus *et al.* (2020), and Bautis and Batista (2022) have formulated listening strategies to be applied in various listening situations. As a result, these strategies facilitate the adaptation to different listening contexts, input types, and listening purposes. The proposals of other authors such as Sharma (2011) and Renukadevi (2014) proved to be valuable theoretical references for this study.

In this regard, Renukadevi (2014) classifies listening strategies as bottom-up or top-down and suggests that bottom-up strategies are listener-based. The listener relies on their prior knowledge about the topic, context, type of text, and language, which helps them interpret the ideas they have heard. Bottom-up strategies are used to grasp the main idea, predict, infer, and summarize.

On the other hand, top-down strategies are text-based, where the listener utilizes linguistic knowledge to comprehend the information. In this case, the listener depends on the language in the message; that is, the combination of sounds, words, and grammar, to arrive at the final message. Top-down strategies are used to focus on specific details while listening and recognizing patterns in word order.

However, the authors of this research believe that listening comprehension is not restricted solely to bottom-up processing (prior knowledge) or top-down processing (linguistic knowledge) but should be seen as an interactive and interpretative process in which listeners apply both types of knowledge to understand messages.

Based on the identified issues and deficiencies, an alternative methodology is proposed. This methodology includes the strategies to be used by teachers for listening comprehension, suitable materials for implementing these strategies, and a set of actions aimed at developing English listening comprehension skills in A2-level medical students. The following elements are detailed below.

Listening Strategies Teachers Should Follow

• Before listening, plan for the listening task

This stage aims to familiarize the student with what they are going to hear and helps them develop skills to anticipate the content. Various teaching tasks are used to prepare the path for understanding what they will hear through prediction activities and working with essential linguistic or situational elements necessary for text comprehension, if needed.

Some of the most common pre-listening stage tasks, proposed by Abreus (2010) and adopted in this study, include:

- Observing images, maps, diagrams, or graphics.
- Summarizing vocabulary or grammatical structures.
- Reading relevant aspects about the topic.
- Creating semantic networks (a graphical arrangement of concepts or interrelation of words).
- Predicting the contents of the auditory material.
- Providing a guiding foundation for the activity (BOA).
- Conducting guided listening practice.
- During Listening: Monitor Comprehension

The goal of this stage is skill development while actively listening. Teaching tasks are directed toward detailed comprehension and should therefore be closely related to the text, allowing students to perform them immediately after its presentation or during the listening process itself. For proper planning of these activities, language teachers should pay attention to their proper guidance and the type of exercises proposed.

The authors embrace the activities proposed by Abreus (2010) for this listening stage, which include:

- Listening with audiovisual aids.



- Completing graphics or tables.
- Following the path on a map.
- Selecting elements from a list of options.
- Listening to determine the essence of the material.
- Searching for specific meaning cues.
- Completing closed exercises (filling in words or phrases).
- Distinguishing between formal and informal registries
- After Listening: Evaluate Comprehension and Strategy Use

The objective of this stage is to develop skills that lead to critical and creative comprehension and delve into the linguistic and sociocultural elements addressed in the text. It is the moment when the predictions made during the pre-listening stage will be confirmed. Therefore, establishing the necessary connections between these two stages is crucial for the effective development of listening as a process.

Appropriate Materials for Working On

As listening is a dynamic process, materials should be authentic, recorded with native speakers and different pronunciations, with the aim of helping students become familiar with regional style and accent variations. Recordings should be selected to demonstrate how English is being used in the contemporary world.

• Materials:

- Radio and television programs.
- Public addressed advertisements.
- Speeches and lectures.
- Customer service phone recordings.



Through these materials, students can not only become familiar with regional style and accent variations but also conduct research, compare information, work in teams or pairs, engage in debates, and make arguments based on the information obtained.

At the A2 level, listening activities should aim to help students understand common vocabulary and expressions in short and clear dialogues. Situations should involve simple expressions, introductions, messages, and advertisements.

Actions started to be implemented:

- Workshops for training within the teaching department to prepare students for this type of exam
- Providing the *At Your Pace* course in digital format for students to engage in self-directed learning.
- Students engaging in self-directed learning through private academies and language schools.
- Teachers creating exercises with the same format as the proficiency exams to train students in class.
- Designing tests aligned with the approaches used in these types of exams.
- Addressing individual differences in the classroom by assigning tasks and mentoring noncertified students.
- Intensifying the implementation of the English language curriculum strategy throughout all years of the program, turning it into a means of communication and a tool for sharing results, as well as working with written literature in the language.
- Providing brochures and digital worksheets focusing on the most challenging grammatical aspects identified in the exam.
- Selecting topics for practicing monologue techniques, such as a wonderful journey, favorite activities, describing something significant they have received, describing someone important in their life, describing their favorite program, describing their favorite house, among others.
- Creating WhatsApp groups based on the levels in which students were placed after the placement exam to assign tasks, clarify doubts, and guide the students.



Actions to Be Implemented in a Second Period:

- Students will be enrolled in courses organized by levels, which will also be offered to healthcare personnel throughout the municipality.
- Developing an alternative methodology for the development of listening comprehension using virtual teaching and learning environments.

In the context of this study, great importance is placed on the development of listening comprehension skills. This is why the proposed methodological alternative has been designed as a practical tool, taking into consideration strategies, suitable materials, and actions that will lead to the expected outcomes upon implementation.

In constructing this methodological alternative, the authors drew on studies conducted by Cordero *et al.* (2014), who provided examples of activities for working on listening comprehension through songs and offered valuable insights into the characteristics of this skill. Other references that supported the proposal included Behiels (2010), who contributed theoretical tools for evaluating materials and types of exercises to be used, and Díaz *et al.* (2012), who provided a holistic view of the alternative based on their own description.

Conclusions

Listening comprehension skills are vital for language learning. There can be no communication without interaction between the sender and the receiver. The analysis of the results from empirical research reflected an insufficient development of English language listening comprehension skills in medical students at the Julio Trigo López Faculty, University of Medical Sciences of Havana. This called for the design of a methodological alternative to contribute to the development of this skill.

The designed methodological alternative will contribute to the development of listening comprehension skills in A2-level students through a series of actions taken by teachers, some of which have already been successfully implemented.

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Conceptualization: A.I.T.G.; Methodology: A.I.T.G.; Research: A.I.T.G.; Formal analysis: A.I.T.G.; Writing (Original Draft): A.I.T.G.; Writing (Proofreading and Editing): M.B.E., M.T.A.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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