

Error Analysis of Verb Tenses: A Case Study of International English Language Testing System Preparation Courses

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Abstract

This descriptive analytic study aims to explore errors in the use of verb tenses made by male and female Saudi learners of English as a foreign language (EFL) who are employees of Prince Mohammad bin Abdulaziz Hospital for National Guards. The researcher applied Corder's Taxonomy of Errors as an instrument to identify and analyze errors found in the learners' written work while they were enrolled in an IELTS preparation course. All the errors were identified by four language experts and put into four categories to denote the types of error made. These categories were omission, misformation, addition, and mis-ordering. The results of this study indicate that Saudi EFL learners make verb tenses errors according to interlingual and intralingual sources. On the basis of these findings, a number of recommendations and pedagogical implications are suggested to reduce further issues in forming tenses in English.

Keywords

Error Analysis, IELTS, IELTS Preparation Courses

1. Introduction

Error analysis (EA) was developed in 1967 by linguistics Professor Stephen Pit Corder in his well-known study, "The Significance of Learners' Errors" (Corder, 1967). EA comprises a set of procedures to identify, describe, and explain errors made by language students and then explain reasons for them (Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2006). There are two main causes of errors: intralingual, which indicates difficulty in learning a second language, and interlingual, which entails interference from a student's first language (Ababneh, 2020).

Applying EA in English teaching has many advantages. *Corder (1967)* emphasized the significance of EA to help teachers monitor their students' progress and identify what they should teach next. Through this analytical approach, teachers can discover why their students make errors and then prepare the appropriate remedial classes. Moreover, the process of accurately identifying and analyzing errors helps to highlight the more frequent errors and why they occur (*Zafar, 2016*).

As students learn to write in a second language, EA plays an important role in analyzing their errors and improving their writing abilities (*AlTameemy & Daradkeh, 2019*). *Tahaineh (2010)* explored errors in written English and showed that the main cause for these is interlingual interference, in such a way students are influenced by grammar in their mother tongue. In contrast, *Al-Shujairi & Tan (2017)* showed that intralingual factors affect students' confidence to use a second language correctly.

Furthermore, many EA studies have been conducted into IELTS preparation courses to identify and assess students' linguistic errors. *Pouladian et al. (2017)* comparatively analyzed the types of errors made by 100 male and female students based on the type and frequency of errors through samples of their IELTS written work. Similarly, *Divsar & Heydari (2017)* analyzed the different types of errors made by 70 EFL learners in their IELTS essays. *Alavi et al. (2020)* also explored the errors of 200 students who had been invited to write an IELTS Academic Task 2 essays of 250 words or more.

Analysis of syntactic errors has become more widespread in the field of language learning and teaching. In recent years, many linguistics researchers have analyzed the grammatical errors made by students. *Alahmadi (2014)* explored those of 30 intermediate level English language students from Saudi Arabia. Similarly, *Al-Shujairi & Tan (2017)* explored Iraqi high school students' written work and the common grammatical errors they made. In particular, investigating language students' grammatical knowledge by analyzing their writing has become essential for teachers and instructors, so that they can address difficulties in the language learning processes (*Amiri & Puteh, 2017*).

Errors made in forming verb tenses are among the most common syntactic errors in written work and can happen to EFL students at any level. Causes of this have been attributed to a range of factors, such as lack of knowledge of English grammar, insufficient linguistic competence, influence of the student's mother tongue, use of loanwords, and lack exposure to English (*Abdullah, 2013*). *Can (2017)* revealed that the most commonly made errors by EFL students across six proficiency levels were incorrect tenses, wrong verb choices, wrong verb forms, missing verbs, and verb agreement. Likewise, *Taher (2011)* investigated the most frequent errors made by high-school students. Common errors included tenses, verb inflections, and subject-verb agreements.

Therefore, this study explores errors made in forming tenses by EFL students taking IELTS preparation courses. Since such students are usually unaware of their errors and unable to correct them themselves, we aim to analyze their er-

rors and identify their causes.

1.1. Statement of the Problem

Written English is considered the most complex skill for both native and non-native speakers to master (Nuruzzaman et al., 2018). It requires a comprehensive knowledge of elements such as content, construction, grammar, aim, audience, vocabulary, and mechanics. Although language teachers spend much time explaining the rules of written English and offering feedback on errors, their students will continue to make mistakes in their writing.

Furthermore, in Saudi Arabia, where students are first taught English at primary school and often continue studying it for years, writing is still considered a challenge (Alharbi, 2019). In essay writing, Saudi students tend to make notable errors, particularly in their use of tenses, spelling, and articles (Sawalmeh, 2013). Even university undergraduates face problems in spelling, tenses, articles, and vocabulary (Khan, 2011).

When correcting essays for IELTS preparation courses, we notice that most learners have difficulty with syntactic rules. In such a way that make it difficult for readers to understand their written work. By assessing their errors, we found that learners struggled with regular and irregular verbs, subject-verb agreement, and all verb tenses. The reasons for this are unclear. Such writing can have awkward sentence structure and not meet the level required by IELTS.

Because this critical problem affects learners' creativity, hinders their ability to convey meaning, and impairs their academic performance, we conducted this study to analyze the written errors made by EFL learners during an IELTS preparation course. We investigated the types of errors they made, the most common errors, and the main causes behind them.

1.2. Research Significance

This study provides a useful reference for IELTS preparation course instructors and uncover the weakness of EFL students when forming verb tenses in written work. It also identifies possible solutions for overcoming such errors. It provides foundational results for future studies in IELTS and IELTS preparation courses.

2. Method

2.1. Research Questions

- 1) What types of verb tenses errors do EFL learners make in their written work during IELTS preparation courses?
- 2) What are the most common written verb tense errors that EFL learners make during IELTS preparation courses?
- 3) What causes written verb tense errors by EFL learners during IELTS preparation courses?

2.2. Population and Sample

The population of this study is represented by the male and female EFL learners

working at the Prince Mohammed bin Abdulaziz National Guard Hospital. The total number of this study was 36 (13 male and 23 female) (Table 1 & Figure 1 and Figure 2).

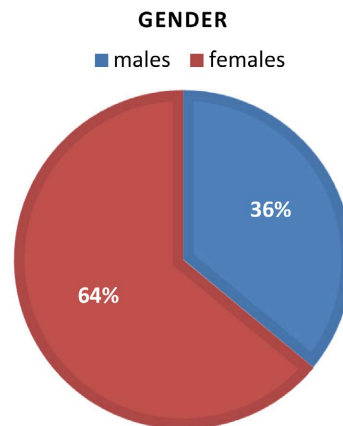


Figure 1. Percentage of males and females within the sample.

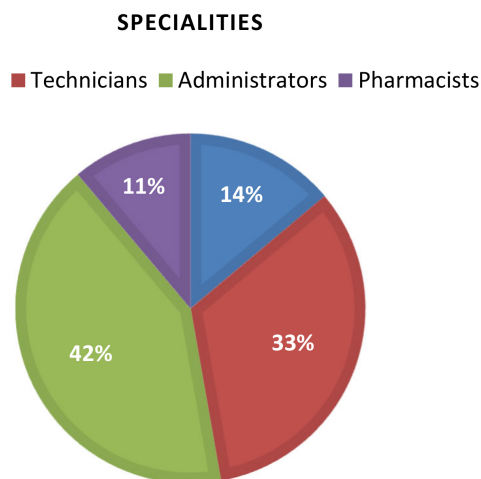


Figure 2. Professional specialties within the sample.

Table 1. Age, gender, and professional specialties of the sample group.

Age	Gender	Specialty
24 - 25	23 females	15 administrators
		12 technicians
	13 males	5 staff nurses
		4 pharmacists

The participants were selected randomly from a group of 57 employees who had been chosen according to certain criteria. The first of these was Saudi nationality to ensure that the study is relevant in the Saudi context. The second was whether the participants had completed two assigned writing tasks. The third

was whether the participants' writing samples were clear and legible-unclear and hard-to-read samples were ignored. The fourth was that the participants should be permanent hospital staff at the Ministry of National Guard Health Affairs (MNGHA). Trainees, internship students, Saudi Career Development Program beneficiaries, and staff dependents were excluded from this study. The fifth was the language level of the participants, according to their results of their placement test. Those chosen for the study were all at a similar level of proficiency. All of these criteria were applied to ensure that the study sample was as homogenous as possible and that the results would not be affected by dramatic differences between individual participants. All of the participants had more than a decade of formal English study.

The description of the study sample is based on the data collected by the researcher, who acted as the participants' IELTS preparation course instructor.

2.3. Research Instrument

We employed Corder's Taxonomy of Errors as an instrument in this study. This taxonomy of errors classifies the types of linguistic errors made by language learners and concentrates on the ways in which surface structures are altered (Figure 3).

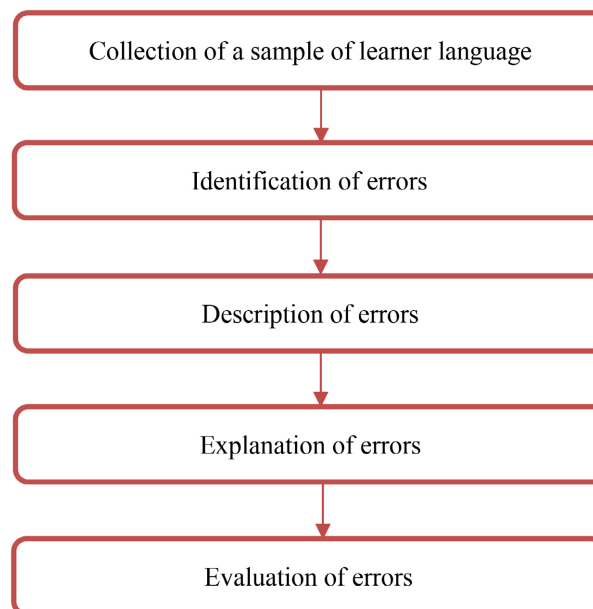


Figure 3. Corder's (1967) taxonomy of error analysis.

2.4. Validity and Reliability

EA is a qualitative method and regarded in the field as the most reliable way to study language errors. It is related to a student's performance, and its range is limited to linguistics interference (Khan & Khan, 2016). A pilot study was conducted for preliminary analysis to check the reliability of the proposed research methods. This took the form of a placement test to determine the level of profi-

ciency of the applicants for an IELTS preparation course. To enroll in the course, the applicants were required to submit a registration form containing initial approval from their heads of departments. The purpose of the course is to help learners achieve high bands in IELTS so that they can apply for university-level courses. Applicants were contacted through their work emails and asked to attend the placement test as part of the registration process. Applicants for IELTS preparation courses are required to have at least an intermediate level of English. The placement test included a writing section which represented an example of the IELTS Academic Writing Task 2. The answers and written work of ten of the applicants were chosen for the purposes of the pilot study. These ten applicants were not included in the sample of the study proper. The test outcomes revealed applicants' capabilities in free English writing and displayed many errors of structure, including verb tense errors. Furthermore, the test was seen to be capable of eliciting responses from the applicants that were relevant to the problem studied. The researcher and her English instructor colleague observed the test session. They also collected, checked, and corrected the test papers.

To assure the content validity of the study instrument, the trustee's validity method was employed. Four English teaching experts were invited to evaluate the content validity of the instrument in this study. They were an English instructor from the Human Resources Training Section at Prince Mohammad bin Abdulaziz National Guard Hospital, two English teachers from Al Aqeeq Schools, Madinah, and an English language supervisor at Madinah Eastern Educational Office. The experts checked the writing samples and reviewed the researcher's identification and description of errors. They also affirmed that the writing materials were appropriate for the learners' standards and needs.

2.5. Research Procedures

A group of Saudi EFL learners was selected by the researcher as the sample for this study. These learners were participants in an IELTS preparation course conducted by the Human Resources Training Section at Prince Mohammed bin Abdulaziz National Guard Hospital. During the course, the participants were asked to write two essays of 250 words. These essays were each representative of the IELTS Academic Writing Task 2. The first writing task aimed to explore the learners' views on what qualities make a good teacher. The second sought to explore their life experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The researcher encouraged the learners to complete the two tasks by expressing their opinions and describing their experiences freely and spontaneously. The participants were informed that no grades would be given for these tasks in order to reduce any potential stress associated with writing.

In order to ensure that all the samples collected from the subjects were valid and unrevised first drafts, the subjects were asked to write manually. They could not ask for help from the instructor's assistant, and they were not allowed to use a dictionary. To help eliminate writing anxiety and to give clear guidance to the participants, hard-copy example answers from Academic Writing Task 2 were

provided during sessions of the course. Following the example of Ngangbam (2016) and Alqhtani (2017), all samples were encoded with numbers instead of learners' names to protect privacy.

First, we gathered the two written compositions into separate envelopes. Second, we applied the previously mentioned criteria in selecting the appropriate samples for the study. In total, 72 writing samples were chosen for the purposes of correcting and identifying the verb tense errors made by 36 of the EFL learners. Of the 36 participants, 23 were female and 13 were male, and all were of Saudi nationality. There were 15 administrators, 12 technicians, 5 staff nurses, and 4 pharmacists. They were aged between 24 and 35 and all were permanent hospital staff.

3. Results

Many writing errors were found in the 72 written compositions produced by Saudi EFL learners at Prince Mohammed bin Abdulaziz National Guards Hospital. These errors concerned articles, repetitions, spelling, punctuation, and capitalization.

In order to answer the three research questions, we tabulated the verb tense errors in terms of their frequency followed by their categories and types. The total and percentages of these errors were also calculated.

3.1. Research Question 1. What Types of Verb Tenses Errors Do EFL Learners Make in Their Written Work during IELTS Preparation Courses?

Based on the analysis of the writing samples, this section discusses the types of verb tense errors made by learners in their written work. Tables 2-8 show that learners made errors in forming seven verb tenses. These tenses are present simple, past simple, present progressive, future simple, present perfect, future progressive, and past progressive.

Table 2. Errors of present simple tense, corrections, frequency, and categories.

Statement Example	Correction	Frequency	Type of error
The teacher <u>get</u> all his knowledge	The teacher gets all his knowledge	29	Omission
<u>is</u> he respect them?	does he respect them?	26	Misformation
I <u>am</u> agree	I agree	33	Addition

Table 3. Errors of past simple tense, corrections, frequency, and categories.

Statement Example	Correction	Frequency	Type of error
I <u>pass</u> his course and I <u>love</u> it	I passed his course and I loved it	16	Omission
boys and girls <u>participates</u>	boys and girls participated	15	Misformation
the virus <u>can be transmission</u>	the virus transmitted	3	Addition

Table 4. Errors of present progressive tense, corrections, frequency, and categories.

Statement Example	Correction	Frequency	Type of error
when she <u>tooking</u>	when she is taking	17	Omission

Table 5. Errors of future simple tense, corrections, frequency, and categories.

Statement Example	Correction	Frequency	Type of error
we all <u>going</u> to lose	we are all going to lose	2	Omission
I <u>will said</u> in the third point	I will say in the third point	2	Misformation
she <u>will have make</u> great student	she will make great students	1	Addition
not will probably understand	will not probably understand	1	Mis-ordering

Table 6. Errors of present progressive tense, corrections, frequency, and categories.

Statement Example	Correction	Frequency	Type of error
COVID-19 pandemic has <u>change</u>	COVID-19 pandemic has changed	2	Omission
people <u>have splited</u> into two	people split into two	1	Misformation

Table 7. Errors of future progressive tense, corrections, frequency, and categories.

Statement Example	Correction	Frequency	Type of error
they <u>will remembring</u>	they will be remembring	1	Omission
will be <u>exitence</u>	will be existing	1	Misformation

Table 8. Errors of past progressive tense, corrections, frequency, and categories.

Statement Example	Correction	Frequency	Type of error
we <u>qurantined</u>	we were quarantined	1	Omission

Present Simple

As data analysis showed, the present simple tense ranked first among the most common verb tense errors, accounting for 58.27% of all errors.

Past Simple

According to the analysis of verb tenses, past simple ranked second among the most common verb tense errors, accounting for 22.51% of all errors.

Present Progressive

According to the analysis of verb tenses, present progressive ranked third among the most common verb tense errors, accounting for 11.25% of all errors. All present progressive tense errors were made as omission.

Future Simple

According to the analysis of verb tenses, future simple ranked fourth among the most common verb tense errors, accounting for 3.99% of all errors. Four

categories were found involving this tense.

Present Perfect

According to the analysis of verb tenses, present perfect ranked fifth among the most common verb tense errors, accounting for 1.98% of all errors.

Future Progressive

According to the analysis of verb tenses, future progressive ranked sixth among the most common verb tense errors, accounting for 1.32% of all errors.

Past Progressive

According to the analysis of verb tenses, past progressive ranked third among the most common verb tense errors, accounting for 0.66% of all errors.

3.2. Research Question 2. What Are the Most Common Written Verb Tense Errors That EFL Learners Make during IELTS Preparation Courses?

In connection with the answer provided to research question 1, **Table 9** depicts the types of verb tense errors found in the written compositions of the learners in this study. The table shows that the 36 participants made 151 errors in seven types of English verb tense: present simple, past simple, present progressive, future simple, present perfect, future progressive, and past progressive. The present simple tense accounted for 58.27% of errors, the past simple accounted for 22.51%, while the present progressive accounted for 11.25%. Other tenses followed by minimum percentages include future simple (3.99%), present perfect (1.98%), future progressive (1.32%), and past progressive (0.66%).

Table 9. Type, frequency, and percentage of verb tense errors.

Type of error	Verb tense	Frequency	Percentage
Verb tense	Present simple	88	58.27
	Past simple	34	22.51
	Present progressive	17	11.25
	Future simple	6	3.99
	Present perfect	3	1.98
	Future progressive	2	1.32
	Past progressive	1	0.66
	Total	151	100

Saudi EFL learners made errors under the categories of addition, omission, misformation, and mis-ordering of verb tenses. Omission errors had the highest number of occurrences, with 68 instances, or 45.03% of all errors made. Misformation errors occurred 45 times, accounting for 29.8% of total errors. Addition errors occurred 37 times, accounting for 24.5% of total errors. Mis-ordering errors were the least common, showing up once and representing only 0.66% of all errors (**Table 10**).

Table 10. Frequency and percentage of error categories.

Types of error	Frequency	Percentage
Addition	37	24.5
Omission	68	45.03
Misformation	45	29.8
Mis-ordering	1	0.66
Total	151	100

3.3. Research Question 3. What Causes Written Verb Tense Errors by EFL Learners during IELTS Preparation Courses?

According to Corder (1967), the causes of linguistic errors refer to interlingual intralingual factors. Researchers and instructors need to investigate these factors to suggest suitable solutions for the problem. Based on the given data, the sources of verb tense found in EFL learners' writing samples in this study were interlingual and intralingual.

Interlingual sources of errors accounted for 29.8% of misformation errors made by the learners when they confused one tense with another. Moreover, the influence of mother tongue became quite evident when omission errors accounted for 45.03% of errors. The learners omitted helping verbs, “-ing” and “-ed” suffixes, and the third-person singular “-s” suffix, since these structures or forms do not exist in Arabic grammar.

Additionally, intralingual sources referred to the errors made by the students due to their incomplete target language skills. The learners made a number of errors that showed their lack of knowledge, including the use of regular and irregular verbs, modals of frequencies, and modal verbs in forming tenses. Unlike students at schools or universities, the sample in this study consisted of adult EFL learners who are also full-time workers at a hospital, which means they have insufficient time to spend on classes, activities, and English practice.

4. Discussion

The present study was designed to analyze 72 writing samples produced by 36 Saudi EFL learners working at Prince Mohammad bin Abdulaziz National Guards Hospital. The learners were required to produce 250-word essay in both writing tasks. The results of this study showed that they made a number of errors in forming verb tenses in English.

The first and second research questions of this study sought to identify the most common types of verb tense errors made by the learners in their written work while studying in an IELTS preparation course. The results indicated that learners made a number of errors in forming seven tenses, including present simple (58.27% of all errors), past simple (22.51%), present progressive (11.25%), future simple (3.99%), present perfect (1.98%), future progressive (1.32%), and past progressive (0.66%), in an uneven percentage.

Perhaps the most significant finding is the high frequency of errors made when forming the present simple tense. The number of such errors in this study matches the findings of [Abdullah \(2013\)](#). It also confirms that present simple, past simple, and present progressive were the most common cause of verb tense errors made by Saudi EFL IELTS preparation course students.

The findings of numerous errors in present and past simple tenses may be explained by the fact that learners relied on these in their written work while the less common errors in progressive and perfect tenses showed a lack of interest, lack of practice, or hesitation in using these tenses to avoid making errors.

Saudi EFL learners made errors in forming tenses under the categories of omission, misformation, addition, and mis-ordering. The omission errors were the most common in this study, accounting for 45.03% of all errors.

The number of misformation errors was followed by the 29.8% of cases in which the students used incorrect structure. However, the instances of addition and mis-ordering errors in the current study did not support previous researches. While addition errors are ranked highest among the error categories in [Abdullah \(2013\)](#) and [Al-Shujairi & Tan \(2017\)](#), addition errors accounted for only 24.5% of mistakes in this study. As for the mis-ordering category, only such error was found in this study accounting for 0.66% of all errors when one of the learners tried to form a sentence using the future simple tense.

With respect to the third research question, it was found that the causes of verb tense errors were interlingual and intralingual. We eventually concluded that the learners were influenced by their mother tongue when adding the necessary parts of words to form suitable verb tenses. These results corroborate the findings of a great deal of the previous work by [Alqhtani \(2017\)](#).

Other issues emerging from influence of mother tongue were shown when the learners omitted the third-person singular “-s” suffix in forming the present simple tense. Moreover, in some cases when using present and progressive tenses, the students did not add the helping verbs “am”, “is”, and “are”. Even adding the “-ed” suffix to form past tenses in regular verbs resulted in errors.

This combination of findings proved that the students lacked knowledge of English grammatical rules concerning regular and irregular verbs, adding modals to main verbs, and using modal verbs to express actions in past, present, and future.

A comparison of the findings of this study with those of other studies worldwide, including [Alqhtani \(2017\)](#), [AlTameemy & Daradkeh \(2019\)](#), and [Alavi et al. \(2020\)](#), confirms that learners of all levels make errors when they write English verb tenses.

5. Conclusion

The main goal of this study was to identify, classify, and analyze verb tense errors in learner’s compositions within the IELTS preparation course. As presented by the data, we have shown that there are seven errors in verb tenses made by Saudi EFL learners. Present simple ranked the most common of these, while past

progressive ranked the least problematic.

A secondary finding was that the errors were related to interlingual and intralingual sources. It seems that male and female Saudi EFL learners of all ages are influenced by their mother tongue when they learn the rules of the target language (TL). In addition, they misunderstand and misuse the grammatical rules of English for many reasons, such as lack of knowledge, interest, or practice.

The results of this study prove to be quite significant, despite the fact that it was conducted on a small scale. They illustrate that learners have tremendous knowledge, sound writing skills, and the ability to convert their ideas, concepts, and opinions. However, they are affected by factors such as the rules of Arabic and misuse of some of the TL rules when they write English essays. They also depend on basic tenses in their written work to avoid making errors. It is possible that the learners are more focused on earning good grades, rather than learning the language. They may also be wary of being judged and feel embarrassed.

6. Recommendations

We conducted the study on a random sample of male and female adult EFL learners taken from the hospital staff of Prince Mohammed bin Abdulaziz National Guards Hospital. Therefore, our recommendations are based on the circumstances and learning environment surrounding this study.

First, giving immediate feedback on linguistic errors is highly recommended since the learners are employees who enrolled in language course for only six to eight weeks. Second, more materials relating to what is taught in the class are vital for them to absorb new information. Third, learners should be encouraged to be creative in their use of writing for business and academic work by using different tenses to express properly when an event has occurred or will occur. Fourth, more awareness is needed of the importance of understanding the particular rules and structures of the TL. Finally, learners should be made aware that errors are an essential part of the learning process.

7. Suggestions for the Further Research

The study has thrown up many questions in need for further investigation. Further researches in this field would of great help in achieving a broader understanding of learners' errors when they practice TL. Considerably, more work will need to be done to determine the causes that lead EFL learners to commit these errors even though they are high leveled learners.

This study focused on the types of errors, the most common ones, and their causes. Further studies can carry out a comparative method to estimate and measure the errors made by males and females groups. They can also compare between the Saudi and non-Saudi's errors and find out the aspects of resemblance and variation.

Another possible area of future research would be conducting interviews with EFL learners. Have them answer tech-based surveys consisting of closed and open questions and analyze their written errors to explore their viewpoints and perceptions regarding causes of their linguistic errors.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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