

Exploring the Application of Situational Teaching Method in Primary School English Speaking Instruction: An Interview-Based Study

Yuhan Chen¹, You Chen^{1*}

¹ College of Foreign Studies, Guangdong University of Science and Technology, Dongguan, China

Email Address

doctorchen4949@gmail.com (You Chen)

*Correspondence: doctorchen4949@gmail.com

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Abstract:

This study explores the application of the Situational Teaching Method (STM) in primary school English speaking instruction. Using semi-structured interviews, this research collected qualitative data from four experienced primary English teachers and eight students from grades four to six, capturing diverse perspectives on the effectiveness of STM. The findings indicate that STM effectively enhances students' oral proficiency, speaking confidence, and interest in language learning, while reducing language anxiety. However, teachers face considerable challenges in implementing STM, including complex scenario design, classroom management, and addressing diverse student proficiency levels. The study also highlights that teachers' experience and scenario design skills significantly impact STM effectiveness, while limited teaching resources and large class sizes pose additional barriers. To address these challenges, the study suggests strengthening teacher training, enriching teaching resources, and adopting flexible scenario designs to better accommodate students' varied learning needs. This research contributes to the theoretical understanding of STM in second language acquisition while providing practical insights for frontline educators aiming to enhance students' speaking skills.

Keywords:

Situational Teaching Method (STM), Primary English Education, Speaking Instruction, Teacher Training, Classroom Management

1. Introduction

Primary school is a critical stage for language acquisition, particularly for developing oral communication skills. Children aged 6 to 12 are widely recognized as being in a sensitive period for language learning, characterized by strong imitation abilities and significant cognitive potential [1]. English, as a practical and globally relevant language, emphasizes not only reading and writing but also speaking and listening. "English Curriculum Standards for Compulsory Education (2022 Edition)"

of Ministry of Education (PRC) clearly highlighted the importance of developing oral communication skills in primary school students through experiential, practical, and participatory approaches [2].

However, despite these guidelines, many primary English classrooms in China still focus heavily on exam-oriented teaching, emphasizing rote memorization and written assessments while overlooking the critical importance of spoken language practice [3]. This approach limits opportunities for authentic language use, resulting in students who perform well on written tests but struggle in real-life communication. Many teachers prioritize grammar exercises, vocabulary drills, and textbook dialogues, neglecting the need for real-world language practice [4]. This imbalance not only hinders students' overall language development but also fails to meet the comprehensive language proficiency requirements of modern society.

To address these challenges, situational teaching has emerged as an effective, student-centered approach. It integrates language learning with real-life contexts, such as shopping, asking for directions, or celebrating festivals, allowing students to naturally acquire language through meaningful interaction. This approach not only increases student participation and interest but also reduces language anxiety, enabling them to express themselves more confidently in supportive, realistic scenarios [5]. Therefore, exploring the application of situational teaching in primary English instruction is essential for improving students' comprehensive language abilities and aligning with current educational reforms.

The primary objective of this study is to investigate the effectiveness of situational teaching in primary English speaking instruction. Specifically, this research aims to understand how primary English teachers design and implement situational teaching strategies, including the use of realistic simulations, role-playing, and multimedia tools to create immersive language environments. Additionally, this study seeks to analyze students' actual experiences in situational classrooms, focusing on their learning motivations, emotional responses, and language output. Finally, it will explore the specific impacts of situational teaching on improving students' oral communication skills and identify practical challenges teachers face during implementation, such as time management, scenario authenticity, and addressing individual differences among students.

This research has both theoretical and practical significance. Theoretically, it aims to validate the effectiveness of situational teaching in real classroom settings, enriching the application of situational cognition theory within second language acquisition. Practically, it provides concrete teaching strategies for frontline educators, offering insights into effective situational teaching methods that can enhance student engagement and learning outcomes, ultimately bridging the gap between theory and practice.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Definition and Core Principles of STM

The Situational Teaching Method (STM) is a language teaching approach that emphasizes the use of authentic or simulated real-life contexts to promote language comprehension and practical application[6]. Its core philosophy is to integrate language learning with context-rich experiences, fostering a “learning by doing” mindset. According to Peng Zhenyu (2023), “STM involves merging textbook content

with real-life scenarios, using visual aids like sketches, role-plays, and interactive exercises to help students grasp language concepts more intuitively” [7]. Chen Sibe (2023) further elaborated that STM should incorporate realistic communicative contexts, such as shopping, asking for directions, and daily conversations, to enhance both language input and output, thereby improving students’ perceptual and expressive abilities [8]. Zhang Zhongpeng (2023) emphasized that STM should be student-centered, leveraging real-world interactions to reduce language anxiety and encourage spontaneous language use [9].

To ensure the scientific and practical effectiveness of STM, several core principles are commonly adopted. First, the principle of authenticity emphasizes that situational designs should closely reflect students’ daily lives, including contexts like shopping, family dialogues, and daily routines [7,9]. Second, the principle of visualization highlights the use of multimedia tools (e.g., AR, animations) and physical objects to present language content in a visually engaging manner, enhancing comprehension [7]. Third, the principle of subject integration requires that situational contexts align with specific teaching objectives, such as using supermarket simulations to reinforce vocabulary and sentence structures in “shopping” lessons [7,8]. Fourth, the principle of practicality stresses the importance of role-playing, dialogues, and interactive exercises to promote real-time language output [10,11]. Finally, the principle of emotional support focuses on creating a relaxed, enjoyable learning environment that reduces language anxiety and builds student confidence through engaging activities [7].

2.2. Research on the Application of STM in Language Teaching

2.2.1. International Research on STM

Internationally, STM has been explored across various educational levels, from early childhood to professional training. Research shows that STM is effective for promoting cognitive development, emotional engagement, and aesthetic appreciation through realistic, immersive learning environments [12]. For instance, early childhood education often uses songs and games to build language awareness, while middle school programs focus on real-world contexts like geography lessons on the Middle East [13]. In higher education, STM is widely used in professional training, such as medical simulations for ICU training and nursing education [14].

Technological advancements have further expanded the scope of STM. Virtual reality (VR) and artificial intelligence (AI) are increasingly integrated into situational teaching to provide real-time feedback and immersive practice. However, the high cost and technical complexity of these tools present significant barriers, particularly in under-resourced educational settings [15].

Looking ahead, STM research is likely to focus on more personalized, AI-driven approaches to language teaching, with an emphasis on enhancing context authenticity, reducing technology barriers, and improving teacher training [14].

2.2.2. Domestic Research on STM

In China, the theoretical foundation of STM emphasizes three main principles: authenticity, visualization, and subject integration [7]. Chen Sibe (2023) further introduced the concept of integrating language input and output in realistic communicative contexts, highlighting the importance of aligning language learning

with real-life situations like shopping or asking for directions[8]. Zhang Zhongpeng (2023) supported this view from a constructivist perspective, arguing that STM should prioritize student-centered interactions to reduce language anxiety and promote active communication [9].

Practical strategies for STM in Chinese classrooms have evolved significantly, incorporating both traditional methods and modern technologies. For example, Chen (2023) explored the use of augmented reality (AR) to create immersive language experiences, like “packing a school bag”, which reinforced vocabulary and sentence structures through interactive simulations [8]. Lai Han (2024) advocated for short, high-frequency situational training modules using micro-lessons to overcome time and space constraints in traditional classrooms [16]. Peng (2023) also emphasized cost-effective alternatives, like simple sketches and physical props, for resource-limited schools [7].

Additionally, hierarchical situational design has gained attention. For instance, Peng (2023) proposed a “dual-track” model combining immersive bilingual environments outside the classroom with targeted role-play exercises within, to enhance students' language output [7]. Other approaches, like sentence group structuring and pseudo-communicative activities, offer creative ways to improve fluency through structured yet flexible practice sessions [17,18].

However, challenges remain. For example, the effective use of AR in rural areas is often hindered by technological limitations [8]. Lai (2024) also noted the need for balanced integration of digital tools to avoid technology-driven distractions that could detract from language practice [16]. Moreover, classroom size and teacher training deficiencies are ongoing issues, as large classes can reduce individual practice opportunities and untrained teachers may struggle to implement STM effectively [10].

2.3. Current Application of STM in Primary English Speaking Instruction

As a student-centered teaching approach, the situational teaching method (STM) has gained widespread use in primary English speaking instruction in recent years. In accordance with Li Xiuxiu (2022), “STM effectively stimulates students' interest in learning by creating language environments that closely mirror real-life situations, thereby enhancing their speaking abilities and practical language awareness” [19]. However, the practical application of STM reveals significant disparities in teaching outcomes. While some teachers creatively integrate multimedia, role-playing, and other innovative techniques to design highly engaging situational activities, others continue to rely on traditional “transmission-style” teaching, resulting in mixed outcomes [20]. For example, Li Hui's (2022) comparative study in rural primary schools showed that students in experimental classes using STM significantly outperformed those in traditional classes in areas such as vocabulary, grammar, and language coherence [21]. Similarly, Peng Yuan's (2023) research further confirmed that experimental students demonstrated superior performance across various dimensions of speaking, including pronunciation, intonation, communication willingness, and language completeness [22]. Moreover, Zhao Xiaorong (2023) found that STM effectively reduces students' speech anxiety and significantly increases classroom participation, as experimental group students were more willing to engage in teacher-student interactions and group collaborations, leading to a more vibrant classroom atmosphere [23].

However, despite these advantages, the practical implementation of STM still faces numerous challenges. Firstly, a lack of theoretical understanding among some teachers remains a critical issue. Dai Enru (2023) noted that “many teachers have only a superficial grasp of essential language teaching theories, such as constructivism and the input-output hypothesis, often treating STM activities as mere ‘classroom games’ without integrating them deeply with specific teaching objectives” [20]. Secondly, resource constraints in rural areas make it difficult for teachers to design contextually relevant situational tasks that reflect students’ daily lives [20,21]. Additionally, the influence of traditional ‘mute English’ teaching practices persists, with some teachers still prioritizing test scores over oral practice, limiting students’ speaking opportunities [19,23]. From the students’ perspective, fear of making mistakes is a major barrier to effective spoken communication. Li Xiuxiu (2022) noted that “many students tend to withdraw when they make pronunciation or grammar errors” [19], and the lack of real-world practice further limits their ability to transfer classroom knowledge to practical communication [21]. Moreover, inadequate infrastructure in rural schools restricts the implementation of complex situational designs, and the current assessment systems, which remain largely test-oriented, fail to adequately evaluate oral proficiency, further reducing teachers’ motivation to adopt STM [20].

2.4. Research Gaps and Innovations of This Study

Existing research on situational teaching methods (STM) often focuses on single regions, such as rural experimental classes, without adequately considering the differences between urban and rural teaching environments. For example, rural schools face significant resource constraints, including limited access to advanced technologies like AR and micro-lesson platforms, yet few studies systematically analyze how these disparities impact STM implementation [20]. Additionally, many studies highlight teachers’ limited ability to create effective situational contexts, often relying on pre-set textbook scenarios, without offering comprehensive training to address this gap [19]. Furthermore, existing research tends to emphasize overall teaching outcomes without considering individual student differences, such as language proficiency and personality traits, which can significantly affect STM effectiveness [20,22]. In response, this study introduces several key innovations. First, it adopts a dual-perspective approach, integrating both teacher and student viewpoints through in-depth interviews to capture the disconnect between teachers’ focus on scenario authenticity and students’ preference for low-stress, engaging environments. Second, it incorporates Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory to develop a culturally adaptive STM framework, emphasizing real-life contexts relevant to Chinese primary students, such as dining out and holiday travel, rather than merely transplanting Western cultural models. Third, it proposes a dynamic, differentiated instructional model that aligns teaching strategies with students’ varying language abilities and interests, moving beyond the “one-size-fits-all” approach to personalized language instruction. Finally, the study introduces a flexible implementation framework, combining short-term “micro-scenario” activities with long-term thematic projects, providing practical, scalable solutions for large classes and resource-limited settings.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

The overall research design is based on a qualitative research paradigm, focusing on in-depth exploration of the practical application of STM in primary English speaking classes. Semi-structured interviews are used as the primary data collection method, allowing for a deep dive into the real-life experiences and subjective perceptions of teachers and students. This approach captures subtle interactions and complexities within classroom dynamics, providing a solid foundation for identifying challenges and opportunities for improvement.

3.2. Research Methods

This study employs semi-structured interviews as the main data collection method. Compared to structured interviews, semi-structured interviews offer greater flexibility, allowing the interviewer to adjust questions based on the respondent's feedback, thereby capturing richer and more nuanced information. This method is particularly effective in revealing teachers' practices in scenario creation, classroom interaction, and students' verbal expression, while also uncovering students' emotional responses and language output in situational tasks.

3.3. Participants

The study involves two main participant groups to ensure diverse perspectives and comprehensive data:

(1) Teacher Group: This group includes four primary school English teachers, each with at least two years of STM experience, with teaching experience ranging from 3 to 8 years (see Table 1). These teachers come from both urban and rural backgrounds, ensuring a wide range of teaching contexts.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Teachers.

Participant ID	Teaching Experience	Teaching Grade Level	Received STM Training	Current Teaching Focus
T1	3 Years	Grade 3-4	Once (School-based)	Lower Grades
T2	6 Years	Grade 4	Twice (District Level)	Middle Grades
T3	8 Years	Grade 5	Multiple (City Level)	Upper Grades
T4	8 Years	Grade 6	Self-taught	Graduating Class

(2) Student Group: This group includes eight students from grades four to six, covering different grades and genders (see Table 2). Each grade includes two students, ensuring balanced representation across high, medium, and low English proficiency levels, facilitating a comprehensive observation of STM's impact on students with varying abilities.

Table 2. Demographic Characteristics of Students.

Participant ID	Gender	Grade Level	Years of English Learning
S1	Male	Grade 4	2
S2	Female	Grade 4	2
S3	Male	Grade 5	4
S4	Female	Grade 5	3
S5	Male	Grade 6	4
S6	Female	Grade 6	4
S7	Male	Grade 6	3
S8	Female	Grade 6	4

3.4. Interview Guide Design

To ensure targeted and meaningful interviews, separate interview guides were developed for teachers and students. The teacher interview guide covers the following key areas: (1) Principles and practices of scenario creation (e.g., how to select teaching scenarios); (2) Classroom management and instructional strategies (e.g., how to handle discipline issues); and (3) Observations on students' speaking ability development (e.g., how to assess students' oral progress). Meanwhile, the student interview guide focuses on their actual learning experiences, including: (1) Interest and engagement in situational classes; (2) Willingness and confidence in expressing themselves during situational tasks; and (3) Feedback and suggestions on specific classroom activities.

3.5. Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection was conducted through both face-to-face and online video interviews (e.g., Tencent Meeting, WeChat Video Calling), minimizing environmental influences on participants' emotional responses. Each interview lasted 10-15 minutes to ensure comprehensive and accurate data. The data analysis process included the following steps: (1) Audio Transcription: Accurate transcription of all interview recordings to ensure no loss of information; (2) Data Coding and Classification: Using NVivo 12 for open, axial, and selective coding to identify core themes, such as scenario design, student participation, and classroom management challenges; and (3) Data Validation: Triangulation of teacher and student interview data to enhance the reliability and validity of the research findings.

3.6. Ethical Considerations

This study strictly adheres to ethical guidelines, ensuring informed consent and privacy protection for all participants. Before each interview, participants were clearly informed of the research purpose, data usage, and privacy protection measures. All audio recordings and textual data are securely stored with encryption to prevent unauthorized access, ensuring the confidentiality of participants' personal information.

4. Findings

4.1. Teacher Interview Results

4.1.1. Current Practices in Scenario Design

Among four interviewed participants, three teachers (75%) reported a preference for designing scenarios closely related to students' daily lives, such as shopping, dining, and asking for directions.

T1 shared: *"My students particularly enjoy the 'mini-supermarket' activity, where everyone actively participates"* (T1).

T2 emphasized the benefits of role-play in her lessons, stating, *"Fruit shop role-playing not only improves language skills but also fosters social interaction among students"* (T2).

T3, who has more experience, mentioned using more complex scenarios like "airport security checks" to challenge older students (T3).

However, one teacher (25%) noted that designing meaningful scenarios for older students can be challenging, as they often find these activities "too simple" and less engaging (T4).

4.1.2. Impact of STM on Oral Proficiency

All four teachers (100%) agreed that STM significantly improves students' oral proficiency and speaking confidence.

T1 observed: *"The shyest students have shown the most significant progress. One girl, who used to speak very softly and avoid raising her hand, now at least dares to participate"* (T1).

T2 added: *"Some students have started initiating conversations, like saying 'How are you?' instead of just repeating textbook phrases"* (T2).

T3 noted that STM helps students develop spontaneous speaking skills: *"They no longer just memorize texts but can now respond appropriately to their peers' questions"* (T3).

Nevertheless, T4 expressed concerns that *"Some advanced students find these scenarios lacking in complexity, which reduces their motivation to participate"* (T4).

4.1.3. Challenges in Implementation of STM

Despite the benefits, STM also presents several challenges in practice. Three out of four teachers (75%) highlighted classroom management as a major issue.

T1 mentioned: *"Sometimes the students get too excited, and it becomes hard to maintain order"* (T1).

T2 also pointed out time constraints: *"A 40-minute lesson is often too short to fully develop a scenario. Just when students start engaging, the class ends"* (T2).

Additionally, T4 noted resistance from older students, stating, *"Some of them find these activities childish and refuse to cooperate"* (T4).

These insights highlight the need for more structured scenario planning and differentiated strategies to cater to students at different proficiency levels.

4.2. Student Interview Results

4.2.1. Perceptions of Situational Teaching

Most students (75%, 6/8) expressed positive attitudes toward STM, describing it as more engaging and less stressful than traditional classes.

For example, S3 and S6 both said: *"It feels like playing a game, much more fun than math class"* (S3, S6).

S7 added: *"Speaking English in these classes feels more natural, and I'm less afraid of making mistakes"* (S7).

However, 2 students (25%) noted that some scenarios felt repetitive and lacked variety.

S2 commented: *"Sometimes the activities feel a bit repetitive. I'd like more diverse tasks"* (S2).

4.2.2. Changes in Speaking Confidence

In terms of oral proficiency, 6 students (75%) reported increased confidence and willingness to speak in class.

S4 stated, *"I feel braver speaking English now, especially during games"* (S4). S5 also noted: *"I feel more natural speaking English, and I don't have to think as long before saying something"* (S5).

On the contrary, 2 students (25%) admitted that they still struggle to express themselves in real-life situations, suggesting that more practice is needed to build their confidence (S1, S5).

4.3. Challenges and Limitations

Despite the clear advantages, STM faces several practical challenges. Three teachers (75%) highlighted the lack of standardized scenario design templates, leading to inconsistent outcomes.

T2 mentioned: *"In large classes, it's difficult to ensure every student is equally involved in role-plays"* (T2).

S5 also noted: *"Some activities are fun, but if the same scenario is repeated too often, it becomes boring"* (S5).

These challenges underscore the need for more structured, varied, and scalable scenario designs to maintain student interest and ensure consistent teaching outcomes.

5. Discussion

5.1. Positive Impact of STM on Primary English Speaking Development

The findings of this study corroborate the theoretical perspectives proposed by Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, which emphasizes that language development relies on authentic communicative contexts. Through situational teaching, teachers create realistic language environments that naturally stimulate students' desire to speak. As noted by T1, *"The shyest students have shown the most significant progress, as they now at least dare to participate during role-play activities"*. This aligns with Vygotsky's assertion that meaningful social interaction within a low-anxiety environment promotes language acquisition.

Moreover, situational teaching has proven effective in reducing students' language anxiety, thereby enhancing their willingness to communicate. Among the interviewed students, 75% (6 out of 8) expressed positive attitudes towards situational teaching, describing it as more engaging and less stressful compared to traditional methods. S3 shared, *"It feels like playing a game, much more fun than math class,"* while S7 mentioned, *"I'm less afraid of making mistakes when speaking English in role-plays"*. This finding highlights the importance of creating a supportive and interactive learning atmosphere that encourages students to actively participate without the fear of being judged.

5.2. Factors Affecting the Implementation of STM

Several factors influence the effectiveness of situational teaching in primary English classrooms.

Firstly, teacher competence significantly impacts the success of situational teaching. As T2 noted, *"Training helped me integrate multimedia and role-play effectively, making lessons more vivid"*. However, teachers without systematic training, like T4, expressed challenges in scenario design, often resorting to simpler and less dynamic activities. This finding indicates the necessity of professional development to enhance

teachers' scenario creation skills and their ability to adapt activities to different proficiency levels.

Secondly, student-related factors also play a crucial role. Individual differences, such as personality and language proficiency, directly affect students' participation and learning outcomes. For instance, S2 stated, *"I feel pressured when the class is too large or when asked to speak alone"*. In contrast, more extroverted students, like S6, reported that situational teaching makes English practice more enjoyable and less intimidating. Hence, teachers should consider these differences when designing activities to ensure inclusivity.

Lastly, the classroom environment and available resources also influence situational teaching's effectiveness. Teachers T1 and T3 pointed out that short lesson durations (40 minutes) often disrupt the flow of activities, while large class sizes make it challenging to engage every student effectively. Additionally, limited resources in rural areas restrict the variety and authenticity of scenarios, as observed by T4, who suggested more support in terms of teaching materials and multimedia tools.

5.3. Implications for Teaching Practice

To optimize situational teaching, teachers should adopt a diversified and layered approach to scenario design, considering students' age, language proficiency, and personality. For instance, while younger students may benefit from playful and imaginative contexts, older or advanced students may prefer scenarios that reflect real-life challenges, such as navigating public transportation or ordering food at a restaurant.

Moreover, classroom management strategies should be refined to balance engagement and discipline, especially in large classes. As T1 recommended, setting clear rules before role-playing helps maintain order while maximizing participation. Additionally, schools should support teachers by providing resources such as scenario cards, costumes, and visual aids to enrich situational activities.

To sum up, situational teaching holds significant potential for enhancing oral English proficiency in primary education. However, to fully realize its benefits, teachers need continuous training and support, while schools should facilitate resource accessibility and classroom innovation. By addressing these factors, situational teaching can become a more consistent and impactful method for developing students' communicative competence.

6. Conclusions

6.1. Summary of Key Findings

This study explored the application of the Situational Teaching Method (STM) in primary school English speaking instruction through in-depth interviews with both teachers and students. The findings revealed several key insights.

Firstly, STM significantly enhances students' oral proficiency and speaking confidence by providing authentic, context-rich learning environments. Teachers reported that even the shyest students showed substantial progress when engaged in realistic role-play scenarios, aligning with Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, which emphasizes the importance of social interaction in language development. For

example, T1 noted, *“Students who used to avoid speaking now participate more actively in class, as they feel less pressured when the language is contextualized”*.

Secondly, STM effectively reduces language anxiety, creating a low-pressure environment that encourages more spontaneous language use. S7 stated, *“I feel less afraid of making mistakes when speaking English in role-plays, which makes me more confident in expressing myself”*. This positive emotional response is critical for building long-term language confidence.

Thirdly, the study highlighted the importance of scenario design. Teachers with more training and experience, such as T3, were able to create more complex, real-world contexts like “airport security checks”, while less experienced teachers, like T4, often relied on simpler, repetitive tasks. This underscores the need for professional development to ensure effective STM implementation.

However, the study also revealed several challenges. Large class sizes, limited class time, and inconsistent resource availability were commonly cited as barriers. For instance, T2 mentioned, *“In a 40-minute class, it's challenging to fully develop a meaningful scenario, and large classes often limit individual participation”*. These practical constraints must be addressed to optimize the effectiveness of STM in real-world classroom settings.

6.2. Limitations and Future Directions

While this study provides valuable insights into the benefits and challenges of STM, it also has several limitations. The small sample size of four teachers and eight students limits the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, the study focused primarily on urban and semi-urban schools, potentially overlooking the unique challenges faced by rural educators with even fewer resources.

Future research should consider larger and more diverse samples to capture a broader range of teaching contexts. Longitudinal studies tracking students’ oral language development over multiple semesters could also provide deeper insights into the long-term impact of STM. Furthermore, integrating quantitative measures, such as pre- and post-test oral proficiency assessments, could complement the qualitative findings and provide a more comprehensive understanding of STM’s effectiveness.

In conclusion, STM presents a promising approach for enhancing oral English proficiency in primary schools. However, its successful implementation depends on ongoing teacher training, improved classroom resources, and flexible teaching strategies that address the diverse needs of students. By addressing these challenges, STM can become a more impactful and widely adopted teaching method, bridging the gap between language theory and practical classroom application.

Conflicts of Interest

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

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