



Professionalism in the classroom: How online learning influences English language instructors

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Citation: AbdAlgane, M. (2023). Professionalism in the classroom: How online learning influences English language instructors. *Contemporary Educational Technology*, 15(4), ep476. <https://doi.org/10.30935/cedtech/13741>

ARTICLE INFO

Received: 17 Jul 2023

Accepted: 15 Sep 2023

ABSTRACT

Due to the quick effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the educational system, English instructors were required to retrain and build a new normal in order to prepare for an online classroom while still keeping their teaching style and professional identity. The study's overarching goal was to look at how English teachers' developing senses of who they are as professionals have affected their views on remote learning. 135 Middle Eastern English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers were surveyed for the research. Responses to a questionnaire based on the teacher professional identity scale and semi-structured interviews with 13 participants provided the data for this analysis. Content analysis was used to categorize the codes representing the qualitative information gleaned from the semi-structured interviews. It seems that many EFL teachers were unprepared for the pedagogical and technical problems they faced while teaching English to foreign students online, and this has had a profoundly destructive impact on the instructors' professional identities as they migrate away from teaching in-person. The findings revealed that the participants' long-term engagement with Edu-Tech during and after their formal education significantly influenced their perception of themselves as professionals. Possible avenues for further research include action research, increasing faculty and staff awareness, and continuous professional development.

Keywords: e-learning, COVID-19 pandemic, information and communication technologies, professional identity of teachers

INTRODUCTION

Several measures were implemented by the Middle East ministries of education to shield national colleges from the COVID-19 pandemic of the coronavirus. Over 7.6 million students from over 210 educational institutions were absent from normal instruction. The educational sector's staff has received swift and rigorous training in the administration of virtual classrooms and distant learning platforms. Many educators are worried about the sustainability of online education (OE) and the effect it would have on language teaching and learning as a result of the rapid transition from the conventional classroom setting to the Internet environment in many parts of the globe. Teachers are reevaluating their responsibilities and the expertise they offer to the classroom in light of recent innovations in language learning technology and pedagogy. The digitalization of course materials, students' increasing familiarity with technology and the Internet, and the difficulties connected with student engagement in the classroom have all contributed to a large increase in professors' workloads. The study's overarching goal was to explore whether or not English language educators' biases towards OE affected their sense of professional self.

Objectives of the Study

In particular, the concepts of distance education via the Internet, online teaching and learning, and the necessary teacher competencies for online instruction will be investigated. Numerous factors, such as language teachers' identities, the concept of teacher professional identity (TPI), language teachers' attitudes

toward the Internet-based distance education, and the factors influencing those attitudes, must be considered when trying to make sense of the shift in how the role of teachers in society is viewed. Thus, this study handles several objectives:

1. Casting the light on issues in the classroom.
2. Motivating improvement of oneself.
3. Exploring perspectives on technological advancements.
4. Studying the implementation of educational technology for language instruction.
5. Investigating online foreign language instruction.

Research Questions

This study aims at answering the following research questions:

1. To what extent do English as a foreign language (EFL) professors publicly acknowledge that they have reservations about delivering courses online?
2. What is the correlation between how EFL professors see themselves professionally and how they feel about e-learning?
3. Is there a correlation between socioeconomic status (such as age, gender, level of education, and years of work experience) and EFL teachers' perspectives on OE and their sense of professional identity?
4. Is there a correlation between EFL professors' views on OE and how they see themselves as educators?
5. What are instructors' perceptions of students' progress in online language learning?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Distant Learning Via the Web

Many universities, both public and private, in the Middle East Region and elsewhere have begun incorporating OE into their distance-learning programs. As classrooms shifted from in-person to digital, educators rethought their strategies for maximizing students' screen time. A recent study by Nazari et al. (2019) found that although many teachers are enthusiastic about incorporating online pedagogy into their language classrooms, many others simply do not have the necessary experience or training in this area. Thus, bringing all education online may have unexpected consequences, including altering educators' sense of professionalism. According to the research of Moser et al. (2021), a language teacher's competencies for teaching language in person should change when teaching language online. Based on this philosophy, a pyramid was created to outline the seven most important abilities for an online language instructor. The competencies of successful online educators have evolved as a result of the complex interplay of individual, pedagogical, contextual, and institutional factors in educational institutions (Powell & Bodur, 2019).

Identifying Language Instructors

The proliferation of online personas and the consolidation of multiple personas is a direct result of the information and communication capabilities made available by digital technologies. Without a doubt, the sudden and dramatic shift to online learning environments has also had an effect on the way in which EFL instructors view their own professional identities. It follows that TPI under scrutiny in this research was itself shaped by a number of factors. However, Hafsa and Borasi (2019) argue that teachers face new challenges as a result of the idea of repositioning themselves in online classrooms, and that teachers' online identities are an integral part of their professional identities. Therefore, when teachers are put in a position, where they must quickly adapt to a new teaching strategy, they may reevaluate their pedagogical tenets. When working in a virtual classroom, a teacher's professional identity is shaped by their convictions about what constitutes good language instruction and the kind of language instructor they aspire to become.

The use of new technologies in the classroom has become increasingly popular in recent years, and this trend has influenced how people see themselves in relation to the study and teaching of foreign languages. Gao et al. (2022) proposed a "model of investment" in which people's identities play a central role in order to adapt to the demands of modern society. Considering the interdependence and coordination between

members of a couple or group, the theory of interdependence postulates that individuals must reach an outcome by considering their behavior to maximize their rewards. The theory (either directly or indirectly) describes how the actions of individuals in social situations affect one another, as stated by (Wang et al., 2021). It was also emphasized that when interpreting the results of an interaction, it is important to keep in mind the different strengths, weaknesses, perspectives, and agendas of the people involved.

Interpretations of Online Distance Learning by Language Educators

The beliefs and values of teachers about online learning are crucial in establishing norms for online instruction. According to He and Loewen (2022), a “paradigm shift” has occurred in the field of education as a result of research that found students’ satisfaction with their learning was unaffected by whether or not the instructor was present in the classroom. Awareness of technology, personal interest in using technology, self-confidence in using technology (Wilson et al., 2021) adaptability to change in pedagogical practices, ability to motivate oneself and determine one’s own destiny (Salikhova et al., 2020) innovation or internal and external barriers to different method applications (Cunningham, 2019) all play a role in shaping teachers’ attitudes toward technology among English language instructors.

ChatGPT

According to Wardat et al. (2023), after gaining a comprehensive understanding of ChatGPT and its functionalities, individuals can make an informed decision regarding the utilization of its potential, while also remaining cautious of its potential adverse consequences. In order to accomplish this objective, individuals may be required to modify their established procedures, a task that might prove challenging due to a natural inclination to resist change. Nevertheless, these reactions typically subside when the technology becomes a commonplace aspect of the majority of individuals’ everyday lives, especially if it is a versatile instrument that is integrated into multiple domains of use. As a result, it is improbable that resistance to change and exaggerated responses will hinder the progress of technology in achieving its full potential in terms of production.

Artificial intelligence has become an omnipresent element in numerous technology-driven goods that humans engage with regularly. The significant progress in diverse disciplines has facilitated the utilization of large language models for a wide array of applications. The authors hold the belief that ChatGPT and comparable language models have great promise because to their ability to generate text that resembles human speech and effectively respond to intricate queries (Wardat et al., 2023).

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The researcher used both qualitative and quantitative approaches (known collectively as a “mixed method design”) in this investigation. For this exploratory study, two questionnaires were used and a semi-structured interview to gather information.

Sample and Data Collection

The sample for this study consists of 135 EFL instructors from public and private Middle Eastern tertiary level institutions who taught their classes exclusively online throughout the pandemic. Independent variables include things like participants’ age, sex, education level, and years spent in college. In this study, the researcher looked at two independent variables: having taken Edu-Tech courses as an undergraduate variable and having participated in OE-related projects or workshops during professional development training. A questionnaire was used and a semi-structured interview to collect data for this investigation. Independent variables were engagement in online technology-related professional development training and completion of online instruction coursework at the undergraduate level. The goal of this study is to examine the professional identity, reform process in online teaching, and the diversity of participants in terms of Edu-Tech training, work experience, and seniority will help make this possible. 23.0% of the 135 respondents had undergraduate coursework in OE, and 77.0% were engaged in professional development activities related to the integration of technology into language teaching.

Research Instruments

This survey Arrosagaray et al. (2019) set out to gain insight into the perspectives and practices of EFL educators with regards to OE and training. The survey asks 55 questions about the perspectives, pedagogies, and experiences of EFL instructors teaching online. The first of the survey's four sections asks respondents to provide some basic demographic information. Arrosagaray et al. (2019) found reliability coefficients of ($r=.91$) for the second part and ($r=.87$) for the third part, both of which are above the minimum required for reliability. The reliability coefficients of the questionnaire's sub-sections were determined to make sure they were valid and reliable; these included questions about respondents' general attitude toward technology ($r=.88$), their use of technology in language instruction ($r=.84$), the delivery of language instruction online ($r=.90$), and their perception of online pedagogy ($r=.92$).

The second instrument for gathering information is TPI scale semi-structured interviews with 13 participants, which was derived from the A number of factors, including English faculty members' eagerness to tackle campus issues and cater to their students' wants and needs, as well as their own desire for career advancement, were factored into the scale's final verdict on the English faculty's level of professional commitment. Academics have tested the reliability and validity of the scale, which consists of 18 items, each with a 5-point rating. According to the data, the reliability coefficients for personal growth were 0.81, for academic difficulties they were 0.84, and for student needs they were 0.85. In this study's scale analysis, there was a high degree of dependability across the subscales for individual development ($r=.83$), academic challenges ($r=.80$), and student wants and needs ($r=.81$). After obtaining assent from the professors through the consent form, a semi-structured interview (El-Soussi, 2022) was performed with them, which consisted of eight open-ended sub-questions. Teachers were polled on their experiences in modifying language-learning software for use in virtual classrooms, as well as their thoughts on the educational methods and virtual language-learning model they had adopted as part of the shift from traditional to digital-based instruction.

Data Analysis

The researcher used descriptive and inferential statistics to summarize the data and look for a statistically significant correlation between the variables. Independent sample t-tests were used to compare the perspectives of teachers who had and had not taken Edu-Tech courses during their professional development training or during their undergraduate study, revealing the perspectives of female and male teachers on the incorporation of technology into language instruction and learning. Teachers of EFL shared their thoughts on the benefits and drawbacks of incorporating technology into EFL classrooms, and these responses were compared using one-way analysis of variance. For this purpose, multiple linear regression was employed to weigh the relative importance of the various factors. Correlation analyses with Pearson were also used to examine the links between TPI's three measures, i.e., the average ratings for "essentials for learning," "concerns regarding academics," and "progress and development in one's own person." After applying the test and receiving a p value higher than .05, it was concluded that the sample size was adequate for the data to be normally distributed. In this case, parametric tests were feasible because the data appeared to follow a normal distribution.

RESULTS

Conclusions From a Descriptive Study

Table 1 displays the mean scores for three categories of online language instruction are mean (M)=3.86, standard deviation (SD)=.41; M =3.36, SD =.34; and M =2.96, SD =.25. On a scale from 1 to 5, where 5 represents a neutral attitude toward technology, the average score was M =3.32 (SD =.22).

In answering the first research question of to what extent do EFL professors publicly acknowledge that they have reservations about delivering courses online? What it has been found was that teachers of EFL had the most positive attitudes toward both the pedagogy of online teaching and online language teaching and learning. Here, educators shared how much time OE had saved them during lesson planning. Approximately 95.0% of teachers reported feeling comfortable developing and delivering online lessons, but 50.0% reported

Table 1. Summary of questionnaire data on English language instructors' opinions on comfort with online learning for teaching

Variables	n	Mean	Standard deviation
1. Online education	135	3.36	.34
2. Making use of technology	135	2.96	.25
3. Online language teaching	135	3.86	.41
4. Technology attitudes	135	3.32	.22

Table 2. Professional identities of teachers: A descriptive analysis

Variables	n	Mean	Standard deviation
1. Essentials for learning	135	4.44	.62
2. Concerns regarding academics	135	4.45	.65
3. Progress & development in one's own person	135	4.49	.66

Table 3. An overview of t-test for use in field of education

Variables	Groups	n	Mean	Standard deviation	t-test		
					t	df	p
Majored in an undergraduate program that focused on use of technology in education?	Yes	23	3.39	0.32	-1.97	135	.023
	No	112	2.24	0.34			
Attending a conference or workshop on use of technology into classroom or teaching of foreign languages.	Yes	98	3.37	0.87	-0.16	135	.032
	No	37	2.76	0.84			

Note. * $p < .05$

lacking the time to fully commit to OE. 63.4% of respondents believed that entirely online English programs were ineffective, while 94.2% believed that a combination of the two would be most effective.

The average ratings for "essentials for learning," "concerns regarding academics," and "progress and development in one's own person," as shown in [Table 2](#), are, as follows: ($M=4.44$, $SD=.62$), ($M=4.45$, $SD=.65$), and ($M=4.49$, $SD=.66$).

Concerning the second study question, what is the correlation between how EFL professors see themselves professionally and how they feel about e-learning? Personal growth and development ranked best among TPI subscales in terms of respondent satisfaction.

The results of this subscale suggested that participants thought it would be helpful to collaborate with co-workers to achieve educational goals. Almost all professors (96.6%) think that teacher training should continue indefinitely.

Findings of a Statistical Analysis

Regarding the third research question of is there a correlation between socioeconomic status (such as age, gender, level of education, and years of work experience) and EFL teachers' perspectives on OE and their sense of professional identity? Teachers' attitudes toward technology were found to be positively correlated with age between 23 and 31, negatively correlated between 39 and 49, and statistically significant when analyzed using one-way analysis of variance ($F[3, 13]=2.51$, $t=.02$, $p<.05$).

Furthermore, those instructors who took Edu-Tech courses in their undergraduate education ($M=3.39$) had a higher average and their perceptions of online pedagogy were more confident, as determined by the t-test results of the sub-category that includes items related to online pedagogy of the instructors participating in the research. Standardized test scores were higher ($M=0.34$) for students whose teachers had access to professional development in the area of technology adaptation.

When comparing individuals who did and did not attend Edu-Tech courses throughout their teacher education, a t-test (see [Table 3](#)) revealed that the two groups were different with respect to the online pedagogy subcategory ($t=-1.97$, $p<.05$). Participants' views on online pedagogy varied considerably between those who had received professional development on the topic ($M=3.37$, $t=-0.16$, $p<.05$) and those who had not ($M=2.76$).

The impact size ($d=0.7$) well above the (Gloster et al., 2020) expectation for a substantial effect, as shown by a t-test examination of the differences in groups' judgments of online teaching.

Table 4. Five-factor analysis of relationship between EFL instructors' opinions on information & communication technology & their own technology & the Internet use in ELT questionnaire

Variables	1	2	3	4
1. E-education	-			
2. E-language learning	.329**	-		
3. Technology use in learning	.268**	.288**	-	
4. E-learning	.251**	.153	.556**	-

Note. ** $p < 0.01$ (2-tailed) & $n = 135$

Table 5. Relationships based on Pearson's method ($n = 135$)

	1	2	3	4
1. Edu-Tech trained	-			
2. Essentials for learning	.248**	-		
3. Concerns regarding academics	.277**	.887**	-	
4. Progress & development in one's own person	.364**	.952**	.914*	-
	.001	.000	.000	-

Note. * $p < 0.05$ & ** $p < 0.01$

Findings from Correlational Studies

In terms of the fourth study question, is there a correlation between EFL professors' views on OE and how they see themselves as educators? It is found that ratings of online pedagogy ($M = 3.37$, $SD = 0.34$) are significantly and positively related to ratings of technology usage ($M = 2.97$, $SD = 0.25$), as measured by Pearson's correlation analysis ($r[129] = .556$, $p < .01$) (Table 4).

Teachers' perceptions of students' progress in online language learning were positively related to their own general use of technology ($M = 3.86$, $SD = .41$, $r[129] = .329$, $p < .01$).

With regards to the fifth research question, what are teachers' perceptions of students' progress in online language learning? Weak positive and statistically significant ($r[129] = .248$, $p < .01$) correlation between students' needs and English teachers' Edu-Tech exposure was found through correlation analysis. The correlation between the share of English teachers who have received Edu-Tech training and the share of students who improved in this area was similarly weak but positive ($r[129] = .314$, $p < .01$) (Table 5).

Qualitative Analysis Results

The results of the interview discussion on the concept of how online instruction affects the self-concept of EFL professors were used to guide the analysis of the interviews. After doing a content analysis, three main ideas emerged.

Development of focus to online learning

Four of 13 teachers surveyed preferred face-to-face lessons to virtual ones. Of the 13 respondents, eight said they support some aspects of online teaching, such as flexibility of time and space, but three showed a strong preference for online teaching. In a survey about health education in some Middle East countries, respondents' top choice was a combination of in-person and remote sources of information.

The remaining five teachers were not sure which type of instruction they would prefer, and while they tended to think that in-person instruction creates a better learning environment, it was clear that they were aware of the benefits of online learning. They did, however, draw attention to other potential obstacles to online learning and teaching, such as the low productivity that influenced their opinions (Table 6).

Lack of willingness to take risks & accept failure

Table 7 shows that eight of the instructors surveyed prefer to utilize online language teaching resources as a foundation for in-person or classroom-based course instruction when building online courses. Since most respondents reported receiving just little, survival-level online teaching preparation before diving headfirst into OE, it seems likely that these changes will be made. Because of the haste with which this adjustment is

Table 6. Prevalence of online transitional purposefulness

Themes	Categories	f
Transition to online should be intentional	Personal instruction	3
	Students' lack of response	4
	Modified classroom dynamics	2
	Lack of face-to-face communication	4

Table 7. Distribution of risk-aversion & fear of experiencing failure

Themes	Categories	f
Resistance to risk-taking & failure	Preferring familiar surroundings	8
	Achieving educational objectives	3
	Exerting greater effort & time	2

Table 8. Behavior trends in a digital language classroom

Themes	Categories	f
Importance of interaction in a virtual language classroom	Leadership qualities on display	6
	Increasing participation from students	3
	Creating connections with others	4

being made, it is possible that a crucial building block in the process of establishing the reputation of OE may be skipped. While both online and classroom language instruction present their own unique pedagogical challenges, teaching languages in these settings necessitates different strategies due to the differences between them.

One possible cause of this problem is a lack of prior planning. Teachers had no models of online teaching strategies that had proven successful, so they stuck with the same methods they had been using in their classrooms in the past. However, because they were not getting any responses from their students, they stopped using practices or tools that incorporated multiple aspects of language learning, such as speaking and writing, and instead focused on those that were more likely to produce the desired outcomes.

However, it should be understood that with the shift to OE, EFL teachers must meet the demands of a new generation of students while also ensuring their own professional fulfilment. As time goes on, it may be anticipated that the Internet and related technologies will continue to evolve, and with them, OE will evolve and become more relevant. What's more, the results of this research reveal that EFL professors' views on technology and the Internet are favorably influenced by the fact that they have both taken courses in undergraduate education and profited from practical training throughout their careers. Teachers who are prepared to put in the effort to improve themselves after undergoing this program need to keep learning and growing.

Importance of interaction in a virtual language classroom

When EFL instructors were asked to define their "presence" as English teachers and in their online classrooms, they all emphasized the importance of maintaining a social presence. According to their job postings, they were expected to possess expert-level knowledge of the subject matter in order to supervise students and run an efficient classroom (**Table 8**).

DISCUSSION

Research found that there was a substantial association between EFL teachers' working experience and preparedness in the classroom and their competences in Edu-Tech as measured by TPI scale. From this vantage point, variables that are successful and path-shaping in the reshaping of professional identity conceptions throughout the transition to OE include teachers' professional development and their work experience in their field. This research's results also backed up the idea that educational institutions communities are becoming more important. Furthermore, studies that back up the importance of a strong community to a productive classroom setting have been conducted (Baker & Moyer, 2019; Chatterjee & Correia, 2020). Teachers' mental health is improved by an educational institutions community that considers their own and their pupils' values and aspirations. This feeling of belonging will be strengthened if employees

are given the opportunity to get to know one other on a personal and professional level. Language teachers and students may work together more effectively if they share a set of core beliefs and give their interactions a shared purpose, but “maintaining a cooperative community requires time and ongoing effort,” as the saying goes (Celebi & Eraldemir-Tuyan, 2022). Her reaction showed that, despite her outgoing and lively personality, she is anxious about how her friends will view her now that she is an online teacher. This backs up findings from a study by Nazari and Seyri (2023) that tracked the evolution of six teacher identities throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Research shows that factors like increased responsibilities, lack of adequate professional preparation, emotional labor, concept transformation to technology-savvy instructors, and especially weak representation of the teacher all play a role in the process by which teachers undergo transitions in their identities.

The predictive value of attitudes toward online learning on the teacher perceptions inventory was confirmed by multiple regression analysis, providing further support for the existence of a causal relationship between the two variables. There was a significant relationship between test scores and online pedagogy ($=.33$) and online language instruction and learning ($=.34$). Since there was a statistically significant correlation between EFL teachers’ professional identities and their attitudes toward and use of ICT and the Internet in language instruction, it is found that the alternative hypothesis is more plausible and reject it. Yasar (2020) found that English teachers’ optimistic views on incorporating technology into their lessons were linked to their ideal technology-using selves. It can be inferred from this that the rapid and perhaps unforeseen shift to OE has contributed to the professional burnout of educators through its construction of online pedagogy. Qualitative analysis revealed that the participants’ sense of professional identity significantly impacted their level of job satisfaction in their chosen profession as English teachers. Responses from interviewees showed a range of approaches to using the Internet to teach a foreign language, with benefits for both the teacher and the student. The lack of the reciprocity principle’s components in the classroom has caused the participant to question her own abilities as a teacher, because she has felt helpless and powerless in front of her OE students. As described by Babvey et al. (2021), a virtual community can only flourish when its members are able to trust one another and work together.

CONCLUSIONS

Overall, online EFL educators lacked the necessary pedagogical and technological tools to succeed. As a result, this shift away from traditional classroom settings has corroded the sense of professionalism held by many educators. Having a general comfort with technology is helpful, but knowing the value of the Internet and technology in language education is crucial when designing online pedagogy. However, when looking at the change from traditional classroom instruction to online-only instruction, it becomes clear that only the English teachers’ technological skills were lacking. Rather than simply adopting technology, universities should authorize units to be set up whose sole purpose is to provide psychological and technical support to teachers as they design, provide, and plan lessons that consider students’ socio-cultural backgrounds, existing skills, and aspirations. Establishing university-based centers for teacher development is one way to show educators that they have the institution’s support. Teachers’ professional communities can be better understood, and teachers’ ongoing education and growth can be supported, if these units are encouraged to do so.

It is possible to overcome the alienation that develops between the teacher and the student by making changes and additions to the educational content during the digitization process. To foster a sense of community through language learning, teachers can incorporate strategies like task-based, project-based activities or pair and group work into their lesson plans. Lessons that emphasize group work can be improved through the use of breakout rooms on the platform on which they are held, such as Zoom, in order to provide feedback to students. Reducing the stress that comes with using technology in the classroom can have positive effects on students’ social and emotional development as well as their language acquisition. Actions toward practical and achievable goals in the course planning process can spare EFL instructors the burden of making ad hoc choices in the face of burnout and the unknowns inherent in online teaching. Based on these analyses, it could be deduced that distance education is rapidly altering the social landscape as technology advances. Consequently, social problems emerge as a result of a breakdown in social equilibrium. On the other hand, innovations in online learning will bring about ways to address existing issues.

Recommendations

Insights gained from this study, it is hoped, will inspire researchers to dig further into the connection between OE and TPI perspectives. Qualitative research methods, such as in-depth interviews, participant observation, and focus groups, may help shed light on hidden or undervalued factors. Research methods like case studies and action research may help us learn more about the linear and long-term effects of OE. Due to TPI being the primary focus of the study, it was decided that a more comprehensive analysis of the educators involved was needed. Research should begin with the assumption that people's emotional and mental states are always shifting due to the complexity of their connections in the social field (Merriam & Grenier, 2019).

Limitations

The fact that the research was conducted solely in some Middle Eastern countries limits the generalizability of the findings to other regions and cultures. It is believed that other nations may encounter comparable challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic, since the transition to online schooling under complete or partial quarantine is not unique to the Middle East Region.

Further Research

Further research could be conducted in relation to the field of OE and its impact on learners as well as instructors considering the expansion of the study population to include other areas besides the Middle East. Research that handles the psychological, social, and economic factors and their influence on learners and instructors. More research is possible to be carried out in terms of online learning at high, intermediate, or primary schools.

Funding: The author received no financial support for the research and/or authorship of this article.

Ethics declaration: The author declared that applicable ethical practices are strictly followed during the study. All subjects gave their written informed consent for inclusion before they participated in the study.

Declaration of interest: The author declares no competing interest.

Data availability: Data generated or analyzed during this study are available from the author on request.

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