

Art. #2342, 9 pages, <https://doi.org/10.15700/saje.v44n1a2342>

English first additional language teachers' attitudes on using e-learning in rural schools in the Vhembe East district in the Limpopo province

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The teaching of English First Additional Language (EFAL) in South Africa is gradually changing from the traditional style because of the devastating effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Efforts are being made to stimulate learners' interest in learning which include using information communication technology (ICT) in the form of e-learning to enhance understanding. The outbreak of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) was a major challenge as it compelled teachers to engage in online teaching – even those who were never trained in the use of technology. A qualitative research method in the form of semi-structured interviews was used to collect data from 15 EFAL teachers who were purposefully selected on the basis that they used e-learning to supplement their face-to-face teaching. I found that the integration of e-learning to the traditional physical contact style was essential in improving the teaching of EFAL. The majority of participants, however, highlighted that they still encountered challenges related to heavy workload and efforts to complete items listed in the work programme. Inadequate training of teachers on e-learning, a lack of resources and poor connectivity also acted as barriers to the full implementation of blended learning, which considerably improves learners' performance.

Keywords: COVID-19; digital technology; e-learning; English First Additional Language; work programme

Introduction

After the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the teaching of English First Additional Language (EFAL) in South Africa shifted from face-to-face instruction to include electronic learning (e-learning). The problem facing the Department of Education was that the majority of teachers did not have adequate knowledge on the use of information and communication technology (ICT) devices. The implementation of ICT in schools is very low although South Africa has one of the fastest-growing economies compared to other developing countries (Ramoroka, 2021). The use and accessibility of ICT has considerably transformed the standard of teaching and learning in developed countries, which has influenced developing countries to attempt to implement blended learning. As we live in the digital age, learning can take place anywhere, using technological devices (Dudeney & Hockly, 2016) and teachers need to be fully equipped to help learners. The young generation uses technological devices for various purposes, including acquiring new knowledge and communicating with others. Jewitt (2008) posits that being literate in the 21st century has changed to a great extent from what it used to be some decades ago. The training of English language teachers, however, has been very slow to embrace digital ways of teaching, although teachers are expected to use digital technology (Clark, T 2018). Philipsen, Tondeur, Roblin, Vanslambrouk and Zhu (2019) argue for a vigorous approach to providing professional development on blended learning, which is essential to improve education in the 21st century.

Over the past two decades, numerous studies have been conducted on e-learning, which makes it challenging to have one clear definition for the concept. RC Clark and Mayer (2011) define e-learning as a form of instruction that is delivered by using a digital device aimed at supplementing face-to-face learning. It is an innovative web-based system that utilises digital technologies which provide an interactive learning environment to learners (Rodrigues, Almeida, Figueiredo & Lopes, 2019). The outbreak of COVID-19 drastically promoted the blending of e-learning and physical contact as a strategy to continue the learning process. Blended learning is a deliberate fusion of traditional, classroom-based forms of learning with online instructional approaches (Nicolson, Murphy & Southgate, 2011). It provides a platform for teachers to engage with learners in class and online during convenient times, as well as for learners to engage with each other after classes (Graham, Borup, Pulham & Larsen, 2017).

The outbreak of the deadly COVID-19 virus and the closing of schools due to lockdown in March 2020 had a negative impact on the effective running of schools (Du Plessis, 2020). It also showed people that the period of judging literacy solely on linguistic proficiency acquired from printed texts has been replaced by an era where digital texts also play a major role. In this case, language teaching cannot be an exception because modern-day learners seem capable of easily acquiring knowledge presented through different means, hence, the concept of teaching English with digital technology is gaining momentum in South Africa as learners communicate and make meaning through new media texts (Kajee, 2018:1). It affords learners the opportunity to share ideas and engage in discussions even when it is not possible or convenient to meet physically due to the pandemic.

Literature Review

As the majority of English second language learners do not have many opportunities to use English outside the school environment, digital technology bridges the gap by keeping learners engaged. Richards (2015:6) points out that “the internet, technology and the media and the use of English in face-to-face as well as virtual social networks provide greater opportunities for meaningful and authentic language use” as compared to what takes place in the classroom. In this digital age learners are no longer restricted to the learning of a second language (L2) in the classroom and in the presence of the teacher, but learning can take place anytime and anywhere provided that learners have access to digital devices and networks. Jantjies and Joy (2016) maintain that language and culture play an essential role when developing technological software to be used to help linguistically diverse learners. The challenge is that the pace at which the Department of Basic Education (DBE) implements the use of online learning in all schools is very slow (Padayachee, 2017). The DBE is trying to ensure that all teachers are effectively trained to use different technological devices that can enhance teaching and learning.

The outbreak of COVID-19 brought cardinal changes to the teaching and learning of English globally (Reister & Rook, 2021), including South Africa, where the study reported on here was conducted. Researchers are advocating for new ways of teaching EFAL during the COVID-19 pandemic to be in line with modern trends. This has forced the DBE to come up with some educational reforms (Baird & Baird, 2018). The majority of learners in rural schools, however, find themselves unable to take advantage of technological trends due to factors like a lack of online resources, unavailability of electricity, and a lack of electronic gadgets needed for e-learning. The implementation of e-learning during the global pandemic need not only be carefully planned by the government for schools but for learners as well as they “may experience significant levels of perceived language anxiety” (Russell, 2020:338). Teachers have also been highly impacted by the sudden closure of schools and the expectation of conducting online teaching (Kim & Asbury, 2020).

Countries where English is taught as a second or foreign language have the responsibility to train teachers to acquire adequate competencies in the use of digital technology, particularly e-learning in the teaching of English. Effective use of e-learning can significantly improve learners’ performance and enhance their critical thinking ability. A study in 12 South African schools revealed that the use of ICT enhances teachers’ development and promotes effective learning (Leach, 2008) while promoting the development of high-order thinking skills in class (Kurt, 2010). Anderson (2008) argues that, in

order to remain relevant, online learning should exhibit four characteristics: learner-centredness, knowledge-centredness, assessment-centredness and community-centredness. The DBE has the responsibility to ensure that EFAL teachers understand these four components that can transform their teaching from the traditional textbook style and focus on the use of digital technology. The approach also promotes collaboration and active learning opportunities among teachers working in the same environment (Davis, Preston & Sahin, 2009).

One disturbing factor in current English language teaching is that the majority of teachers globally have limited digital competency in the use of technological devices (Galaczi, Nye, Poulter & Allen, 2018). Pulham and Graham (2018) add that teaching through e-learning and the blended environment require specific skills, however, teacher training programmes do not equip pre-service teachers with these new skills. Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic has put language teachers under further stress by demanding almost instant changes to their regular style of teaching, such as preparing online classes and assessment (MacIntyre, Gregersen & Mercer, 2020). To accelerate the pace of promoting blended learning, language education planners have the responsibility to ensure that tertiary institutions provide adequate knowledge to pre-service teachers and provide professional development to in-service teachers.

For digital technology to add quality to education, teachers need to evaluate the information that learners acquire on a daily basis. Lei (2010) argues that the quality of technology used in class is of greater concern than its quantity. Quality of technology refers to the manner and type of technology whereas quantity refers to how much technology is used to influence learners’ outcomes. Stover, Yearta and Harris (2016) investigated the benefits of using blogs to improve the reading ability of learners and found that the innovation yielded good results. Results from these studies affirm that the use of ICT in a blended format was appropriate and essential during COVID-19 during which learners attended school on a rotational basis.

Blended learning introduces digital technology into the traditional classroom setting, thus, it is geared towards helping all learners in class, irrespective of their contexts. It is a useful teaching and learning process which focuses on the complementary use of digital media and enhances face-to-face forms of learning (Poon, 2013). It improves learner performance by integrating the traditional method represented by the presence of teachers and learners in class with the modern online programmes that can be done where neither are physically present (Aguilar, 2012). Dumford

and Miller (2018) caution that the online part of e-learning must be carefully planned and monitored and teachers should encourage learners to engage with a variety of educational activities from different sites. The sudden shift from physical classroom learning to virtual learning, caused by the outbreak of COVID-19, however, included both prospects and challenges for learners and teachers (Hartshorn & McMurry, 2020). Unfortunately, due to the urgent need for the transformation, both teachers and learners were not adequately prepared for remote learning, a situation worsened by a lack of resources – particularly, in rural schools.

The teaching of language skills is a laborious, demanding activity that cannot be easily achieved using one method, thus the inclusion of online learning is a boost for the process (Marsh, 2012). Blended learning is effective in exploiting a vast pool of learning resources which gives learners and teachers ample choices, rather than being restricted to available ones (Tawil, 2018). The availability of various gadgets is essential in helping teachers implement e-learning that can promote learners' active learning. Garrison and Vaughan (2008) argue that the approach significantly enhances the learning experience of all learners without the stress of having to choose just one method. When comparing the effectiveness of online learning and blended learning, it was discovered that blended learning was better than online learning (Topping, Douglas, Robertson & Ferguson, 2022).

The additional attraction of blended learning rests on the fact that it is a flexible approach making it possible to have different forms and models that are applied in different contexts (Staker & Horn, 2012).

The use of digital technology has the potential of making English language teaching innovative – thus effective and interesting in diverse learning situations (Abbasova & Mammadova, 2019). Sert and Boynueğri (2016), for example, investigated whether there was a correlation between the use of digital technology in English language classrooms and self-directed learning. They found that there was no correlation between learners' and teachers' perceptions of the use of technology as most teachers struggled to use digital technological

devices effectively. Young and Bush (2004) note that it is necessary for teachers to understand the pedagogical implications of the digital technology they use to ensure that they employ the software optimally. Jones (2014) concurs by indicating that digital literacy for language teachers is imperative to help them acquire the necessary competencies that will enable them to use digital technology. It is, therefore, important for countries to equip teachers with adequate knowledge of the use of digital technology in teaching.

With this study I aimed to determine teachers' perspectives on the use of e-learning in teaching of EFAL, based on the following objectives:

- To highlight the importance of using e-learning during the COVID-19 pandemic to enhance learners' interest in learning.
- To evaluate whether EFAL teachers have sufficient knowledge on how to use e-learning.
- To explore whether EFAL teachers can use different forms of assessments available in e-learning platforms.

Methodology

The study reported on here was qualitative in nature as I sought to evaluate EFAL teachers' attitudes on the use of e-learning in their classes. A total of 15 EFAL teachers were purposefully selected to participate in the study. They were selected on the basis that they used e-learning to supplement the traditional method prescribed by the DBE. All participants were Grade 6 EFAL teachers employed in different public schools in the Limpopo province of South Africa. Their teaching experience ranged between 5 and 31 years; this span of experience was deemed significant on the assumption that those respondents with many years of teaching had witnessed different stages of curriculum changes and, therefore, would provide relevant information. Four of the participants started teaching during the apartheid era where the focus was on teaching grammar rules and promoting memorisation. When e-learning was introduced at the beginning of the 21st century, teachers who had been in the system for many years found it challenging to adapt to the new method. Table 1 below shows the participants' demographic details:

Table 1 Participants' demographic information

No	Age	Gender	Teaching experience	Qualifications
1	27	Male	05	Bachelor of Arts (BA) + Post Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE)
2	36	Male	08	BA +PGCE
3	38	Male	10	Bachelor of Education (BEd)
4	56	Female	31	Primary Teachers Certificate (PTC) + BA
5	55	Male	30	PTC + BA + BA (Honours)
6	31	Female	07	BA + PGCE
7	42	Female	17	BA + PGCE
8	38	Male	13	BEd
9	54	Male	31	Primary Teachers Diploma (PTD) + Post Graduate Diploma (PGDip)
10	29	Female	05	BA + PGCE
11	48	Male	21	Bachelor of Arts in Education (BAEd) + PGDip
12	42	Female	15	BA + PGCE
13	37	Female	11	BEd
14	56	Female	30	BA + PGCE
15	48	Male	19	BEd

In this study I focused on how EFAL teachers in selected schools blended learning approaches to improve the linguistic competence of learners during the COVID-19 pandemic. The use of e-learning was not mandatory, hence, the majority of teachers still used the textbook and chalkboard methods prescribed by the DBE, although, a few ventured into the realm of blended teaching.

All participants in this study were selected on the basis that they had been teaching English for a minimum of 5 years and had received training on using ICT to supplement traditional classroom teaching. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with all participants in their workplaces during school hours, although COVID-19 rules and restrictions were strictly observed. Semi-structured interviews were purposeful as they created a dialogue between me and the participants by allowing me to observe participants' feelings and beliefs when responding to questions. I explained the approach to be used to collect and analyse data to the respondents and I ensured that all ethical principles were adhered to before the start of the interviews. Each interview session lasted for about 1 hour to afford participants the opportunity to give comprehensive responses to the questions asked. I carefully transcribed and sorted the data collected during the interviews. The data collected were statements by participants. I transcribed these statements verbatim before arranging them into categories. Thematic analysis was used to identify and categorise themes to ensure that the data analysis was conducted smoothly (Clarke & Braun, 2013).

Findings

Data were systematically arranged in line with the three objectives and then analysed to evaluate EFAL teachers' attitudes on the use of e-learning in teaching English in schools during COVID-19. The findings and recommendations on the three objectives are discussed in the following section.

The Importance of Using E-learning during the Covid-19 Pandemic to Enhance Learners' Interest in Learning

Participants unanimously agreed that teaching in the digital age only using the traditional way of teaching cannot help learners acquire the requisite knowledge. The outbreak of COVID-19 has resulted in limited physical contact between teachers and learners which means that e-learning must be promoted. The majority of young teachers indicated that they always strived to learn how to use digital technology in everything, including language teaching. After attending a 1-day workshop on using e-learning in language teaching, most of the participants indicated that the learners participated more when engaged in e-learning than when the teacher provided them with grammatical rules and examples. One participant indicated the following:

The use of digital technology has enhanced the morale of my learners and, also has encouraged them to do their work independently during lockdown. It enables them to engage each other in discussions and share ideas before writing exercises. I also realised that even those learners who used to be passive in class during the time when they physically attend classes can actively engage others during discussions online.

When learners actively participate in class, it boosts their confidence and enhances their communicative competence which is one of the main objectives of language learning. Another participant enthusiastically commented that "e-learning helps learners to do extra work willingly at their own pace which is not the case when you use the textbook method as some learners are lazy to read." Another participant indicated that "digital technology has transformed language teaching from its traditional chalkboard and the textbook to that of tablets and smartphones." This is in line with Richards' (2015) argument that for language teaching to remain meaningful and authentic, it

must incorporate digital technology for the benefit of learners.

All participants supported the use of the blended approach, although, it was clear that their abilities to apply the method differed quite significantly. They agreed that COVID-19 had brought a sudden change in the way they used to teach, therefore, they had been forced to adapt quickly to e-learning to support limited physical contact in class. About half of the teachers complained that there was a serious shortage of resources in their schools and most of the learners did not have smart cell phones or tablets to use to access information during class or at home. One participant commented: *“Only 15 in a class of 58 learners have access to smartphones which makes it difficult for me to give them extra work in the week they are not supposed to come to school.”* This statement confirms that, although participants were eager to use e-learning to bolster the traditional method, challenges threatened to derail the process, which included a lack of resources and internet connection in rural areas. To ensure that e-learning was used effectively in school, adequate resources should have been provided and EFAL teachers should have been thoroughly trained in implementing these.

Evaluation of EFAL Teachers' Understanding of the Rules and Procedures for Using E-learning during Covid-19 Pandemic

Determining participants' effective understanding of the use of e-learning, the data revealed that numerous differences existed. The responses ranged from those who used digital tools for exercises once or twice a week to those who used it for various activities on a daily basis.

The data revealed that the majority of participants had a basic understanding of using e-learning as a platform as they were unable to fully explicate how they used them effectively. It was clear from their responses that some of the participants still needed training on following the rules and procedures on how to use digital tools in teaching. One participant explained:

As language teachers, we are prepared to use e-learning tools in our classes to help our learners keep abreast with current changes. The main challenge is that the Provincial Department of Education provided training to us only after the outbreak of COVID-19 and yet expect us to use blended learning effectively.

The above statement highlights that participants required more training in the use of e-learning to enable them to apply any knowledge gained to help learners. EFAL teachers who had advanced knowledge of digital technology had a distinct advantage in the use of e-learning tools and blending these with physical contact when learners attempted to attend classes. This was in line with Tawil's (2018) assertion that the effective use of

blended learning was paramount in helping learners acquire a new language and promoting communication in that language.

The data also revealed that there was a slight difference between participants with a few years and those who had many years of teaching experience. Participants who had been teaching for many years were negative towards e-learning and blamed the DBE for not providing effective training. Careful analysis of the data revealed that some of them were not eager to engage in the self-discovery of some of the new strategies or to practice what they had been taught during the workshop. During the interview, one of them complained that *“teaching learners remotely during the pandemic is important but the gadgets are complicated and can only be understood by young teachers and those with advanced skills in computer literacy.”* Data revealed that some participants were not willing to use e-learning and preferred the traditional style of language teaching.

Participants who had been teaching for less than 10 years were eager to use digital technology; they did it with ease, hence, they managed to discover new forms of teaching and assessment. One participant shared his experience by pointing out that *“I am always eager to discover new things, that is why since we attended the workshop, I have tried my best to implement new ways of teaching.”* This confirms that younger participants understood the advantages of using blended learning to inspire learners to become active participants in class.

Examination of EFAL Teachers' Use of Different Forms of Assessment Contained in the E-learning Platforms

A critical examination of participants' responses confirmed that the majority of the participants did not effectively use different forms of assessment as contained in the e-learning platforms or digital technology tools. They reported that they understood the different forms of assessment available in e-learning or digital technology tools, however, they cited several challenges that prohibited them from using these assessments effectively. The challenges included teaching in overcrowded classes, a lack of smart gadgets that learners could use at home, low proficiency levels among learners, the inability of learners to do tasks on their own and the long list of tasks prescribed by the Department of Education (DoE) to be completed quarterly. When asked how they managed to balance giving tasks through e-learning and those required by the Department, one participant elaborated:

I am aware that using e-learning or ICT helps learners to cover days lost due to COVID-19 which limits the days for physical contact. The challenge is that subject advisers expect us to finish tasks indicated in the term which require a lot of time,

and thereafter we can do exercises on e-learning platforms.

Participants were also asked to provide evidence of the different tasks they gave learners to do using e-learning. They all provided evidence of the tasks done but there was no consistency in the number of tasks done and the time that the learners were given to do those tasks. Some participants, particularly those who had been teaching for a long time had done fewer tasks as they preferred the traditional way of teaching and assessment. This was because even though learners attended school on a rotational basis and disregard digital technology tools as enhancement, these young learners wanted to learn. One participant defended why she had given her learners fewer tasks by indicating that “[t]he subject adviser does not encourage us to use e-learning because learners do not have resources.” The DBE has the responsibility to plan a balanced work programme that caters for both face-to-face and e-learning. Another participant said:

Our curriculum advisers emphasised that we should give our learners more work to do at home when they are not supposed to come as their performance is evaluated on the marks gathered during the year and final examination. He thinks online learning can be used, only if we have additional time because after the end of the COVID-19 all learners will return to school.

Focusing on doing mainly prescribed activities disturbs the effective use of blended learning; unfortunately, the DBE was caught off-guard when COVID-19 started, hence, officials did not amend the existing teaching and learning structure and plans. Learners were mainly assessed using multiple-choice questions that were convenient to give online. It was expected that the DBE was responsible for providing resources to all schools so that all learners had the opportunity to acquire knowledge during these difficult times. E-learning is easy to manage and affords learners the opportunity to do extra work in the comfort of their homes and have more time to share ideas, which is not the case when they are in class. Language planners, therefore, should consider the fact that learners are better able to engage with others during online discussions which helps them acquire requisite information.

All participants acknowledged that different forms of assessment contained in different digital technology tools were necessary for helping learners improve their English proficiency levels as well as their confidence to engage with others. They also acknowledged that the tool deepened their understanding of the use of technological devices in language teaching and helped them develop their professional practice. One participant remarked: “*I have benefitted a lot since I started using digital technology tools as they help me to give my learners different assessment tasks.*”

Digital technology tools, for instance, help teachers to record lessons and download activities that they send to learners to do in their own time before coming to class. The use of e-learning, therefore, encouraged English teachers to share their experiences with colleagues, stimulate learners’ interest in learning, as well as promote learners’ high-order thinking when doing tasks.

Discussion and Implications

With this study I assessed the prospects and challenges of using e-learning in the teaching of EFAL to learners in rural schools where they attend classes on a rotational basis. In relation to the first objective, all participants acknowledged that digital technology was crucial in stimulating learners’ language development, particularly during unusual periods such as COVID-19. They also admitted that they were gradually migrating from the chalk and textbook system as the main teaching strategy to blended learning. The inclusion of e-learning in their schedule saved them time which was previously spent on physical teaching and marking learners’ work. Some participants who worked in extremely rural areas complained that schools did not have enough computers. Furthermore, learners also did not have smartphones or necessary gadgets and this derailed progress in the effective use of digital technology. This is in line with Lucas and Yunus’ (2021) findings that the use of e-learning is effective although it has limitations which include accessibility of smartphones and internet connectivity. It is the responsibility of the DBE, therefore, to amend existing programmes to prioritise e-learning, provide adequate resources and ensure that there is uniformity in the implementation of e-learning in schools countrywide.

The second objective elicited varied responses as participants had different skills and abilities in using e-learning. Younger participants, for instance, showed great enthusiasm in implementing the tool compared to older participants who were accustomed to the traditional style of teaching. Older participants needed to understand the paradigm shift in the education sector and practice using the tool effectively. All participants blamed the DBE for the slow pace of implementing digital transformation, citing reasons such as inadequate resources, insufficient training, and professional development of teachers on the use of digital tools.

With the last objective I explored whether EFAL teachers could use different forms of assessment contained in the different software programmes. The results indicate that very few participants were able to do this. The majority of the participants complained that the DBE expected them to do the tasks prescribed in the term plan before the end of a quarter, which did not afford them enough time to use the assessment tasks

contained in the digital technology tools. The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in some of the teaching time being lost as all schools were forced to close. This concurs with Kim and Asbury's (2020) assertion that both teachers and learners suffered emotionally when schools were closed due to COVID-19. Moreover, all tasks in the suggested template followed the traditional teaching style where learners were given tasks to do and the teachers assessed their performance manually by entering marks on the form provided. It was a laborious process that left participants with limited time to use e-learning to boost learners' performance.

The advent of the Fourth Industrial Revolution has advocated digital technology as one of the instruments of teaching and learning. Participants agreed that they needed to keep abreast of teaching innovations and that e-learning was an important platform that promoted higher-order thinking and creativity among learners. This corroborates Kurt's (2010) findings that integration of digital technology promotes higher-order thinking and creativity among elementary school learners and that blended learning could only significantly improve learning when all learners become active participants (Jeffrey, Milne, Suddaby & Higgins, 2012). The training of pre-service teachers and professional development of in-service teachers needed to prioritise blended learning and create a platform for online learning (Reister & Rook, 2021). Effective planning, proper guidelines, training of all teachers in the use of digital technology, as well as providing adequate resources to all schools were imperative to help both teachers and learners use digital technology for the enhancement of knowledge.

Conclusion

With this study I aimed to explore the attitudes of EFAL teachers on the use of e-learning in rural schools in the Vhembe district and found that numerous challenges hindered the effective implementation of e-learning. An in-depth analysis of the collected data revealed that the majority of EFAL teachers were at the initial stages of fully exploiting the e-learning platform, hence, they indicated that they needed adequate training and resources to implement the tool. EFAL teachers had positive attitudes towards the implementation of e-learning as they believed that it improved their learners' linguistic proficiency in English – their L2. As the country is already in the Fourth Industrial Revolution, it is important that the DBE ensures that the educational landscape is improved by initiating digital technology for all learners and ensuring that all teachers are thoroughly trained.

Drawing from the findings of the study, e-learning provides learners with opportunities to explore information and construct knowledge in the

absence of physical interaction. In this context, teachers should rather function as facilitators and monitors to check whether all learners were doing the same tasks and had gained adequate knowledge on a particular task. I recommend that the DBE provides intensive training to all EFAL teachers on how to use e-learning effectively, so that they can implement blended teaching during unusual periods, such as COVID-19. E-learning should be applied uniformly in language teaching and EFAL teachers need to attend workshops on the use of assessment tools. Meticulous implementation of e-learning will positively impact the education system in South Africa – even after the COVID-19 pandemic has passed.

Notes

- i. Published under a Creative Commons Attribution Licence.
- ii. DATES: Received: 15 March 2022; Revised: 26 September 2023; Accepted: 16 February 2024; Published: 29 February 2024.

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