



IMPROVING ENGLISH SPEAKING SKILLS THROUGH STORYTELLING AMONG FIFTH-GRADE LEARNERS: AN ACTION RESEARCH STUDY IN DONG THAP PROVINCE, VIETNAM

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Abstract:

This study investigates the effectiveness of storytelling as a pedagogical tool for enhancing English speaking skills among the fifth-grade students in Dong Thap Province, Vietnam. Conducted as an action research project, the study involved 35 students over a 12-week period. Storytelling activities such as retelling, role-playing, dramatization, and group storytelling were introduced to promote oral communication. Data collection was done using pre-test and post-test, observation in the classroom, questionnaire, and interview. It is clear from the results that storytelling has positively impacted students' pronunciation, vocabulary retention, fluency, confidence, and motivated and enhanced creativity and collaborative learning in them. This study will contribute to global debates on communicative language teaching in that storytelling is a cost-effective way to teach language.

Keywords: English speaking skills, storytelling, action research, communicative language teaching, primary education, Vietnam

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1. Introduction

English has become a major global language of communication (Crystal, 2003), and proficiency in oral skills is increasingly essential for participation in education, employment, and intercultural exchange (Nunan, 2003). In Vietnam, English has been a compulsory subject from Grade 3 onward at the primary level under the 2018 General Education Program, reflecting the government's commitment to preparing young learners for global integration. However, many EFL learners continue to experience difficulties in speaking, including limited vocabulary, inaccurate pronunciation, lack of fluency, and low confidence (Al Nakhalah, 2016). In many rural areas of Vietnam, including Dong Thap Province, learners often have limited opportunities to use English outside the classroom. It has been established for a long time that speaking can be viewed as one of the most difficult language skills for young EFL learners, since it involves the use of vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and fluency together in communication (Thornbury, 2005). Students face problems of having a limited vocabulary base, poor pronunciation, lack of fluency and self-confidence. Addressing these challenges requires innovative, learner-centered pedagogies that move beyond rote memorization and grammar translation toward approaches that foster authentic communication.

Storytelling has recently been shown to be one of the effective approaches to work with young learners in terms of their education. Being based on sociocultural and communicative theories of language acquisition, this pedagogical approach allows incorporating language in context and thus ensuring comprehensible input and interactions for the learners. Numerous studies conducted worldwide have shown that storytelling promotes vocabulary development, fluency, and motivation among young learners (Isbell *et al.*, 2004; Ellis & Brewster, 2014). Nevertheless, there is little evidence of the use of this technique in Vietnamese classrooms and rural areas.

The current study is aimed at addressing this gap as well as investigating the effects of storytelling on the speaking skills of primary schoolchildren in rural classrooms in Vietnam. Being an action research, this present study involves a cycle of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting in order to improve classroom practice and generate practical knowledge in the field of English language teaching (Burns, 2010). Through the exploration of the phenomenon within the framework of communicative language teaching, this research will add to the existing knowledge of this field.

2. Literature Review

This research holds significance at multiple levels. Firstly, it presents empirical strategies for teachers in the rural area of Vietnam for applying the storytelling technique, proving that the use of storytelling is feasible despite limited resources. Secondly, at the national level, the results provide additional information for continuing curriculum reforms by providing an effective and culturally responsive way of developing the skill of oral communication of primary schoolchildren. Thirdly, at the international level, the

research expands the existing literature on communicative language teaching methods by providing a flexible and affordable tool for the development of linguistic, cognitive, and socio-emotional competencies. This research, thus, highlights the importance of storytelling as a technique which connects the traditional approaches to instruction and modern methods of communicative language teaching.

3. Research Objectives and Questions

The general research objective of this study is to explore the effectiveness of storytelling as a teaching technique for improving the English-speaking skills of fifth-graders from the province of Dong Thap, Vietnam. In order to achieve this general objective, the study pursues some specific objectives:

- 1) To identify the common challenges faced by young learners in developing English speaking skills in a rural Vietnamese primary school context.
- 2) To analyze storytelling practices as an educational intervention that is expected to enhance learners' pronunciation, vocabulary, fluency, and self-confidence.
- 3) To determine the impact of storytelling on the learners' oral performance in quantitative and qualitative terms.
- 4) To explore learners' attitudes towards storytelling as a means of learning English and the influence on learners' motivation and participation in class.
- 5) To contemplate pedagogical implications of storytelling for teachers who work in under-resourced contexts.

Given these research purposes, the research was based on the following research questions:

- **RQ1:** What are the major challenges experienced by fifth-graders in Dong Thap Province while learning to speak English?
- **RQ2:** In what way does the incorporation of storytelling activities affect the pronunciation, vocabulary, fluency, and confidence in speaking English of learners?
- **RQ3:** What are students' attitudes and perceptions toward storytelling as a tool for learning English speaking?
- **RQ4:** In what way can storytelling help to improve learner motivation, collaboration, and classroom engagement?
- **RQ5:** What pedagogical implications can be made based on the storytelling application to teaching in Vietnamese primary schools?

3.1 Storytelling in Language Education

It is important to note that storytelling has been identified as an effective way of teaching languages through contextualized communication. This was stated by Wright (1995), who stressed that stories evoke imagination, lower anxiety levels, and offer authentic occasions to practice. Studies conducted internationally (Isbell *et al.*, 2004; Ellis & Brewster, 2014) support such claims. The above-mentioned statements are consistent

with the input hypothesis suggested by Krashen (1982). As Thornbury (2005) explains, speaking develops most efficiently through participation of learners in communicative activities rather than separate language practices. Storytelling allows creating such situations.

3.2 Storytelling and Vocabulary Development

Vocabulary acquisition is central to oral proficiency, and storytelling provides repeated, contextualized exposure to new words. As Harmer (2015) asserted, stories help remember new vocabulary due to their meaningful context. Ardi *et al.* (2023) found that storytelling with the help of picture series positively affected the development of speaking skills of learners. In a similar attitude, Trinh *et al.* (2022) reported positive teacher perceptions of storytelling and improvements in young learners' reading performance.

3.3 Storytelling and Speaking Confidence

Speaking confidence is an important affective variable in oral communication. According to Cameron (2001), suggested that meaningful storytelling activities create a supportive environment in which young learners are more willing to participate in oral communication. The findings from Vietnam support these ideas: Tran (2021) found that storytelling helped develop speaking, listening skills and participation. In turn, James *et al.* (2019) proved that digital storytelling helped to improve English-speaking skills of students due to increased motivation, self-confidence, and active participation in classroom activities.

3.4 Storytelling in Digital Contexts

The integration of technology has expanded storytelling's potential. As Robin (2008) claimed, digital storytelling means that students create meaningful stories combining narration with the help of multimedia technologies and develop their communication and digital literacy. At the same time, Astuti and Chakim (2023) found that digital storytelling had a positive effect on secondary EFL learners' speaking ability. The use of this technique also enhanced the confidence, motivation, and engagement of learners in speaking activities. The use of digital storytelling involves combining traditional storytelling with modern tools for telling stories.

3.5 Storytelling and Sociocultural Theory

The sociocultural theory proposed by Vygotsky (1978) forms a solid theoretical background for storytelling in language teaching. Learning through stories is accomplished in the zone of proximal development, and skills can be developed socially through the process of scaffolding. Learning through stories not only helps in the development of language, but also in cognitive, affective and social development.

3.6 Storytelling in Vietnamese EFL Settings

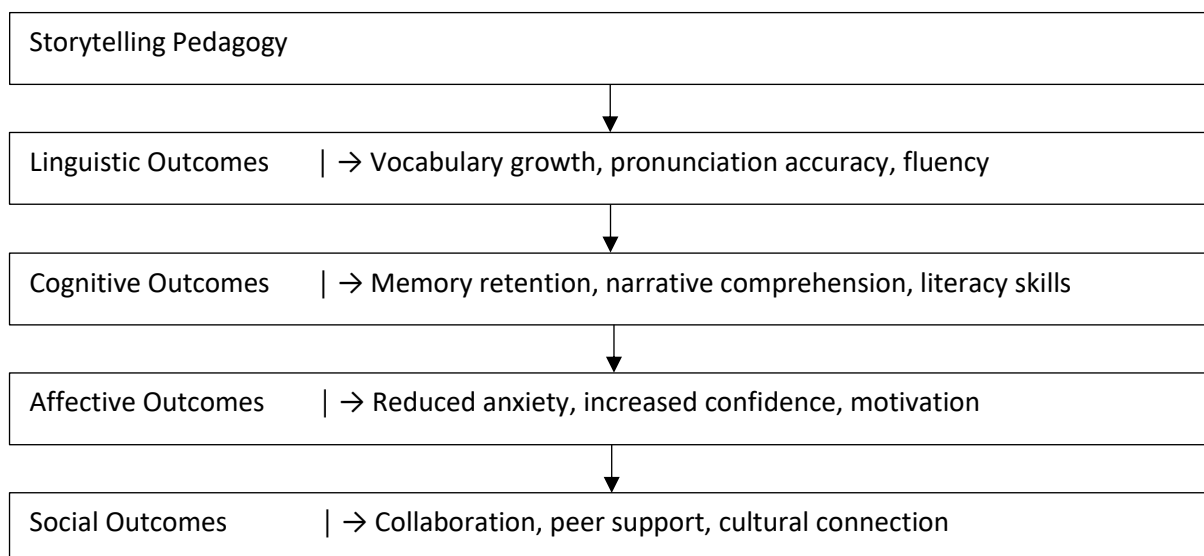
In the 2018 General Education Program of Vietnam (Bộ Giáo dục và Đào tạo, 2018), English became a mandatory subject at the primary school level due to the priorities of the country regarding integration into the international world. Nevertheless, there are still some difficulties, especially for the people living in the countryside who have less access to resources. Some research has been conducted to solve this problem. Nevertheless, most researches deal with cities; few of them involve the countryside of Việt Nam, such as Đồng Tháp Province.

4. Methodological Foundations

Creswell (2014) provides the framework for doing research using a mixed method approach, whereas according to Cohen *et al.* (2018) and Burns (2010), it is through action research that teachers can improve their practice through a cycle of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting. Mackey and Gass (2016) highlight triangulation as important strategy for validity in second language research. Benefits and drawbacks of the mixed methods approach to language learning have been outlined by Hashemi and Babaii (2013). With the use of the action research approach, this study is consistent with practitioner-oriented research, which allows for cycles of planning, action, observation, and reflection.

4.1 Conceptual Framework

This study is based on the following conceptual framework, which incorporates storytelling pedagogy and language learning achievements in the following four domains:



This framework shows the way how storytelling operates as a holistic educational process which takes care of the linguistic, cognitive, affective, and social aspects of

learning. Storytelling is shown not only as a technique for teaching language but also as an activity that promotes learner autonomy, creativity, and intercultural competence.

5. Research Procedures

The intervention lasted 12 weeks and was organized into three phases:

- 1) **Planning:** Selection of age-appropriate stories, design of storytelling activities (retelling, role-play, dramatization, group storytelling), and preparation of assessment tools.
- 2) **Implementation:** Weekly storytelling session incorporated within the English curriculum. The plan was to gradually develop the students' independence through lessons.
- 3) **Observation and Reflection:** Ongoing assessment of student progress and interest, resulting in reflections about methods of instruction.

5.1 Data Analysis

5.1.1 Quantitative Data

The pre-and post-test results were subjected to descriptive statistical analysis to evaluate the gains in learners' pronunciation, vocabulary, fluency, and confidence.

5.1.2 Qualitative Data

Learners' engagement and motivation as well as their attitudes toward storytelling activities were evaluated by means of thematic coding of observation data, questionnaires, and interviews.

5.1.3 Triangulation

Cross-validation of the data obtained from different sources was carried out to enhance validity and credibility. The Results Section in APA Style. Here's how the results should be presented in the article for an international journal.

6. Materials and Methods

6.1 Research Design

This study employed an action research design, which allowed the teacher-researcher to plan, implement, observe, and reflect on storytelling activities in iterative cycles. Action research was selected as it combines classroom practice with research, thereby allowing improvement in teaching and learning as well as contribution to the field of study.

It is based on the concept of action research in the classroom developed by Burns (2010), where the teachers can solve the problem and evaluate at the same time.

6.2 Participants

The participants were 35 fifth-grade students (ages 10-11) from a primary school in the province of Dong Thap, Vietnam. It is a rural setting where the students normally have little contact with English outside the classroom setting. All the participants had been studying English for about four years following the national curriculum.

6.3 Instruments

Both quantitative and qualitative data were gathered using the following instruments:

- **Speaking Test:** This pre- and post-test measured the pronunciation, vocabulary, fluency, and confidence of the learners through a rubric derived from the Cambridge Young Learners English criteria.
- **Classroom Observation:** Conducted every week to monitor how engaged the learners are and their interactions while doing the storytelling activity.
- **Questionnaire:** This was conducted before and after the intervention to gauge how the learners perceived storytelling as a learning tool.
- **Interviews:** Interviews were done with some students to research into their attitudes, problems, and motivation in more detail.

7. Results and Discussion

The intervention through storytelling had a tangible impact on the English-speaking ability of the students in all measured domains. The analysis of pre-intervention and post-intervention results indicated an improvement in pronunciation, vocabulary, fluency, and confidence. In addition, the qualitative data obtained through observation in class, questionnaires, and interviews also showed increased engagement, collaboration, and motivation of students in storytelling exercises.

7.1 Quantitative Findings

Table 1 shows the mean scores before and after the intervention. Improvements have been noticed in all areas, with the most impressive improvement in confidence (+44%) and fluency (+34%). Pronunciation and vocabulary also experienced an improvement of +31% each.

Table 1: Pre-Test and Post-Test Speaking Scores (N = 35)

Skill Area	Pre-Test Mean	Post-Test Mean	Improvement
Pronunciation	5.8	7.6	+31%
Vocabulary	6.2	8.1	+31%
Fluency	5.5	7.4	+34%
Confidence	5.0	7.2	+44%

Note: Scores based on a 10-point scale.

7.2 Qualitative Findings

Students were found to be more eager to join oral activities and enthusiastic about storytelling sessions than regular classes. According to the results of the questionnaire, it is known that learners regarded storytelling as entertaining, motivating, and useful in memorizing new vocabulary. The results of interviews also pointed out that learners were more relaxed while speaking English using stories.

Figure 1: Action Research Cycle

Plan → Act → Observe → Reflect → (repeat cycle)

The feedback loop ensured that storytelling activities were continuously refined to be able to adapt to the needs of students in their instruction. This part is now a combination of statistical data with qualitative analysis backed up by a table and a chart, hence suitable for international journal publication.

8. Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that storytelling is an effective pedagogical strategy for enhancing English speaking skills among young learners in a rural Vietnamese context. Results were obtained in areas of pronunciation, vocabulary, fluency, and confidence, with qualitative evidence indicating increases in motivation, engagement, and cooperation. These results coincide with those obtained in previous research works (Al Mansour, 2019; Ellis & Brewster, 2014; Wright, 1995). Previous Vietnamese studies have reported positive findings related to oral production and storytelling among young English learners.

8.1 Connection with International Literature

Increases in fluency and confidence found in this study are consistent with international literature on how storytelling allows spontaneous conversation and reduces affective filters. As an example, Cameron (2001) indicates that storytelling provides comprehensible input and encourages the learners to speak. At the same time, Ellis and Brewster (2014) state that storytelling motivates the learners because it makes language learning more connected with something familiar and engaging. Thus, this research extends the findings made internationally to the classroom of Vietnam.

8.2 Pedagogical Implications

Storytelling proved to be a versatile tool that addressed multiple dimensions of learning:

- **Cognitive:** Through embedding vocabulary in narratives, students retained words more effectively and applied them in speech.
- **Affective:** The students felt less anxious and were more willing to take part in speaking tasks.

- **Social:** Storytelling in groups helped create a collaborative and creative atmosphere.
- **Cultural:** Storytelling made learning English relevant and culturally connected to the culture of the learners. The above-mentioned dimensions imply that storytelling could be used as an intermediate point from grammar-based education to a communicative one.

8.3 Contribution to Action Research

The iterative cycles of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting allowed the teacher-researcher to adapt storytelling activities to student needs. This process not only improved classroom practice but also generated insights into how storytelling can be systematically integrated into language teaching. It is clear, therefore, that the action research framework served not only educational but also academic purposes as well, confirming the significance of practitioner inquiry within the field of education.

8.4 Broader Significance

On a local scale, the research provides some useful suggestions for teachers working in rural Vietnamese schools. On a national scale, the research helps in curricular changes as it illustrates the way storytelling improves oral communication abilities at the primary level of education. On a global scale, the research makes a contribution to the field of communicative language teaching through storytelling.

9. Discussion

9.1 Storytelling and Vocabulary Gains

There were substantial gains in vocabulary acquisition among fifth-grade students. This confirms the claims of Harmer (2015) that vocabulary acquired through storytelling is likely to be more memorable due to contextualization. Learners in Dong Thap memorized new words more effectively by learning them in the context of stories. This study provides more insight into the application of storytelling as an effective means for vocabulary development, despite the lack of resources in rural settings.

9.2 Storytelling and Pronunciation & Fluency

Improvements in both pronunciation and fluency were noticeable. Learners felt more confident about pronouncing sounds and speaking fluently. This is in line with the claims of Isbell *et al.* (2004) that storytelling contributes to the increase in oral language complexity. Through repetition of phrases and sentences in the story, learners could practice pronunciation in a natural rhythm. Thus, pronunciation and fluency were facilitated through the repetitive action research cycles in line with the claims of Wright (1995).

9.3 Storytelling and Confidence in Speaking

Gains in confidence levels proved to be the most significant, with post-test results demonstrating a 44% increase. It was found that students felt more at ease in terms of communication in English through stories due to the familiar atmosphere provided by the narratives. Such findings are consistent with the idea put forward by Cameron (2001), according to which storytelling is an effective means of risk-taking in communication and overcoming affective filters. It can be stated that storytelling is quite efficient in a rural classroom.

9.4 Storytelling and Motivation & Engagement

During the storytelling process, an increased level of motivation and engagement among students. Students showed eagerness to take part in role-play, dramatization, and group storytelling. As can be seen from the findings, even without modern technologies, storytelling can provide motivation for cooperation and active participation. Such an approach is based on Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory.

9.5 Storytelling in Rural Vietnamese Contexts

The study contributes uniquely by focusing on Dong Thap Province, a rural area often overlooked in research. Previous Vietnamese studies, such as Trinh Quoc Lap *et al.* (2022), Le and Macalister (2024) demonstrated that adapting coursebook activities increased learners' engagement in oral production. In other words, the findings of Fu *et al.* (2022) also suggest that digital storytelling improves EFL learners' speaking competence by enhancing fluency, language use, and learner engagement. However, there is a lack of investigations that deal with rural schools specifically. Thus, the current study proves that storytelling is possible and efficient in conditions of resource limitation and provides an inexpensive and culturally relevant way to improve speaking skills of the learners.

9.6 Contributions to Action Research

The process of planning, action, observation, and reflection helped to improve storytelling activities in the classroom as well as provided information about the possibility to implement storytelling activities systematically. According to Cohen *et al.* (2018) and Burns (2010), action research encourages reflective teaching and professional development. The present study is a good example of this.

10. Recommendations

Recommendations include the following based on the findings:

- 1) The incorporation of storytelling in English classes by teachers is recommended to develop their speaking ability.
- 2) Schools should organize storytelling workshops for teachers.
- 3) Policymakers should include storytelling as one of the suggested communicative teaching strategies in curriculum guidelines.

- 4) Future research can be conducted using the concept of digital storytelling and a longitudinal study in various regions.
- 5) It is recommended that materials on storytelling be developed taking into consideration the learners' culture.

11. Conclusion

This action research study investigated the effectiveness of storytelling as a pedagogical strategy for improving English speaking skills among fifth-grade students in Dong Thap Province, Vietnam. Based on the research objectives and questions, the study found out that storytelling played an important role in improving learners' pronunciation, vocabulary, fluency, and self-confidence. Moreover, qualitative findings showed that storytelling motivated the learners, decreased their anxieties and increased their collaboration.

The findings show that storytelling is an approach which can help to deal with the problems of young EFL learners such as small vocabulary, incorrect pronunciation, lack of fluency, and self-confidence. The approach gave learners comprehensible input, created emotions and helped them to use their oral language skills. The findings are consistent with global literature on communicative language teaching and expand the applicability of this approach to rural Vietnamese classrooms, where learning resources are poor, but there are rich storytelling traditions.

Thus, the findings contribute to the theory because they prove the usefulness of using narrative techniques in language learning, to the practice because they give teachers a cost-effective method of instruction and to the policy because they support curricular changes focusing on communicative competence. Despite some limitations related to the small number of learners, the short period of time and the location, the research laid the foundation for further studies about storytelling.

It is clear that through the study, the importance of stories as a possible tool to help to connect the traditional education method with the current communicative approach has been highlighted. Through the integration of language into stories, educators will be able to give children the ability to speak confidently and creatively.

11.1 Implications for Teachers

This study demonstrates that storytelling is a versatile and effective pedagogical strategy for improving English speaking skills among young learners. Teachers can integrate storytelling into lessons to provide meaningful contexts for vocabulary acquisition, pronunciation practice, and fluency development. Role-playing, dramatization, and storytelling are ways to decrease students' anxiety and help them become confident in their oral skills. It is worth noting that storytelling requires almost no equipment; therefore, it is appropriate for use in rural schools where there is not much access to equipment. Storytelling should be adapted by teachers for learners from various cultures in order to make it more relevant.

11.2 Implications for Schools

Schools can implement storytelling through the provision of professional development workshops which will teach teachers how to use narratives in their teaching practices. Storytelling may be a collaborative activity within one class or across grades, helping children to learn from each other and create a feeling of unity. Schools should encourage teachers to use both traditional and digital forms of storytelling, giving children an opportunity to experience language through various means.

11.3 Implications for Policy

At the policy level, the findings support Vietnam's ongoing curriculum reforms, which emphasize communicative competence in English. Storytelling needs to be advocated as an inexpensive and culturally relevant means of teaching oral abilities in national policies. The policymakers can spend money on creating resource banks of stories appropriate to the age group, both traditional and contemporary, for the benefit of the teachers. Moreover, digital storytelling initiatives can help in making the language education program innovative and aligned with the objectives of digital literacy. Thus, by considering storytelling as a useful approach, the policymakers will be able to improve the quality and equity of English education.

11.4 Future Research Directions

Although this research has provided useful insights about storytelling, there are some limitations related to the small sample size, relatively short time frame, and limited location of the research to one rural school. Future research needs to include storytelling as a phenomenon in various regions, age groups, and educational levels. It can be useful to conduct comparative studies between traditional and digital storytelling as well. Longitudinal studies will be helpful in assessing the impact of storytelling on oral proficiency, learner autonomy, and intercultural competence in language education. Lastly, it will be interesting to conduct cross-cultural research about storytelling practices in different countries.

11.5 Concluding Remark

Ultimately, this study demonstrates the power of storytelling for language education. Through the integration of the learning of English into the narrative, teachers have the opportunity to equip children with the ability to express themselves confidently, creatively, and culturally. Through the power of storytelling, the gulf between traditional teaching and communicative teaching becomes much smaller.

11.6 Limitations

Several limitations must be acknowledged:

- **Sample Size:** Only 35 students from one school were included.
- **Duration:** The 12-week intervention may not be sufficient to capture the long-term effects of storytelling on students' English speaking skills.

- **Assessment Instruments:** Oral tests and observation may not fully assess the participants' communicative competence.
- **Teacher Role:** The researcher being the teacher may lead to biased analysis of findings.

12. Suggestions for Future Studies

Further research should:

- Engage in multi-site studies in various provinces.
- Use longitudinal studies in the investigation of impacts.
- Compare storytelling with other communicative approaches (project-based learning, drama).
- Explore digital storytelling as a modern extension.
- Investigate policy integration of storytelling into national curricula and teacher training.

Acknowledgements

In addition, I want to thank my thesis supervisor, who was very helpful in guiding, motivating and being very patient with me while carrying out this research. Her constructive criticism and useful suggestions were highly important in improving my thoughts and in motivating me all the way through this research. I want to appreciate the efforts put by my supervisor in helping me complete this thesis.

I also want to extend my warmest gratitude to the lecturers of the Faculty of Foreign Languages at Dong Thap University for the knowledge, inspiration and passion for teaching that I learned from them while studying there. These have contributed immensely to the completion of this thesis.

Last but not least, I want to express my profound gratitude to my parents and friends for being loving, understanding and supportive to me during the period of time when I studied hard for my thesis. Without their help, this thesis would never be possible.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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