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PEDAGOGICAL CHALLENGES IN TEACHING ENGLISH FOR YOUNG LEARNERS (TEYL) AT AL-ULUM ISLAMIC SCHOOL PEKANBARU

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Abstract

This research aimed to investigate the pedagogical challenges faced by English teachers in Teaching English for Young Learners (TEYL) in the context of an Islamic school. Qualitative research was employed with three English teachers from Grades 1, 3, and 6 at Al-Ulum Islamic School, Pekanbaru. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and classroom observations, and then analyzed thematically. The findings showed that they encountered various challenges, including differences in students' abilities within a class, limited instructional time, heavy teaching workloads, lack of resources and professional training, difficulty in maintaining students' motivation alongside participation, as well as curriculum-related obstacles. To address these issues, they adjusted their teaching by differentiating materials and activities, applying varied strategies and media, positioning stronger students as peer models, and modifying assessment practices to suit learners' abilities. The implications that can be given from this research emphasize the importance of providing professional development opportunities in TEYL and also highlight the need for stronger institutional support for English teaching in Islamic school contexts.

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INTRODUCTION

English education for young learners has gained attention in many contexts, including Indonesia, as many scholars and policymakers believe that early exposure to a foreign language can help children establish a strong foundation for communicative competence and future academic achievement. Cameron (2001) states that children learn best when they are engaged in interactions, play, and meaningful activities connected to their real lives and interests. These kinds of activities stimulate children's curiosity, creativity, and motivation to learn. However, creating such an interactive and supportive learning environment is not always easy in real classroom settings. Butler (2022) and Zein (2017) highlight that teachers struggle to apply child-centered methods when the classroom conditions do not support them. For example, teachers often experience limited preparation time, restricted instructional hours for English, a lack of adequate teaching resources, and the challenge of managing classes with mixed levels of ability and motivation.

In relation to these issues, the concept of pedagogical competence becomes central to the success of English teaching for young learners. Pedagogical competence refers to teachers' ability to plan and organize lessons, use appropriate teaching methods, engage and motivate students, manage classroom behavior, select and use instructional media, and assess students effectively (Qodriyah, 2016). Following these perspectives, Shulman (1987) conceptualized the idea of Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK), which integrates subject matter knowledge and pedagogical strategies, therefore emphasizing that teachers must understand not only what they teach but also how to make it comprehensible and engaging for learners.

This perspective is particularly relevant in Teaching English for Young Learners (TEYL), where teachers must transform abstract language knowledge into concrete, age-appropriate experiences. As Cameron (2001) highlight, young learners have short attention spans, rely heavily on contextual and visual support, and benefit from interactive, playful, and hands-on learning activities. Similarly, Pinter (2017) underlines that TEYL must be adapted to children's cognitive and emotional development, making pedagogical competence a decisive factor in shaping effective classroom practices.

Moreover, J. Richard and J. Roger (2001) emphasize that effective teaching requires aligning instructional design with learners' needs, interests, and current ability levels, meaning teachers must plan lessons flexibly and responsively to accommodate individual differences. However, when teachers lack sufficient pedagogical competence, achieving this alignment becomes difficult. As a result, instructional practices may fail to address students' diverse needs, leading to limited engagement and uneven learning outcomes.

Several previous studies have also stated that low pedagogical competence contributes to classroom difficulties in TEYL settings. For instance, Zein (2017) emphasized that many novice Indonesian teachers lacked sufficient understanding of child psychology and flexibility in lesson planning, which limited their ability to design engaging and developmentally appropriate activities for young learners. Likewise, Virgianti et al. (2020) discovered a gap between teachers' positive perceptions of Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK) and its actual implementation in classrooms, showing that although teachers were theoretically aware of effective pedagogy, their practices often failed to support students' language development. These findings indicate that low pedagogical competence, whether due to inadequate psychological insights or weak application of PCK, significantly affects the quality of English teaching for young learners.

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In Islamic schools, these pedagogical challenges become even more complex. Teachers not only have to deal with classes where students show different levels of ability, unstable motivation, and limited use of appropriate media, but also must integrate English teaching with religious content and values, which can restrict the time and resources for English lessons. Qodriyah (2016) found that teachers at Nara Islamic School in Cirebon struggled to design creative activities due to their focus on moral instruction and their limited access to suitable English teaching materials. Similarly, Akmal et al. (2022) identified that mentor teachers in state Islamic schools in Banda Aceh faced administrative burdens, frequent curriculum changes, time constraints, and low student engagement, which made it difficult to adapt lessons to students' diverse abilities. In addition, Marzulina et al. (2021) stated issues in MUBA Regency Islamic boarding schools, such as low motivation, limited facilities, time pressure, and overcrowded classes, which made it difficult for teachers to sustain interactive and child-centered learning.

Most existing research on TEYL has documented the challenges faced by teachers, both in public elementary schools and in Islamic educational institutions such as Islamic boarding schools and Islamic secondary schools. However, there is still little research that specifically highlights how teachers in regular Islamic schools respond to these challenges in their daily teaching practices. In particular, although previous research has emphasized issues of resource limitations, time pressures, administrative demands, and differences in student ability, evidence on the adaptive strategies teachers use to adjust their pedagogy in this unique context remains limited. Therefore, this research seeks to fill this gap by focusing on Al-Ulum Islamic School in Pekanbaru to investigate not only the challenges faced but also how teachers adapt their teaching to meet the diverse needs of young learners.

METHODS

This research employed a qualitative research design to gain an in-depth understanding of the pedagogical challenges experienced by English teachers in teaching English to young learners at Al-Ulum Islamic School, Pekanbaru. Qualitative research was considered appropriate because it enables researchers to explore complex social phenomena by focusing on the meanings and interpretations that individuals assign to their everyday practices (Stake, 2010). Instead of attempting to quantify variables, this study sought to capture teachers' personal experiences, perspectives, and classroom practices in their natural settings. It aimed to uncover how teachers plan, deliver, and adapt lessons to accommodate the diverse learning needs of young learners, and to examine the factors that shape their pedagogical decision-making within the school context.

The participants consisted of three English teachers teaching at Al-Ulum Islamic school in Pekanbaru. They were purposively selected for their active involvement in teaching English to young learners across different grade levels. They were teaching at Grades 1, 3, and 6, representing different stages of primary education, and had teaching experiences ranging from 10 to 17 years. The purposive selection ensured that these teachers possessed relevant experience and could offer rich, context-specific insights into the challenges they faced. Including teachers from different grade levels also allowed the research to capture a broader range of classroom dynamics, student characteristics, and teaching conditions within the school.

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Data were collected through two methods: semi-structured interviews and classroom observations. The semi-structured interviews focused on nine pedagogical aspects, namely lesson planning, teaching methods, student engagement, classroom management, instructional media, evaluation, teaching challenges, professional development, and curriculum implementation. Each interview lasted approximately 30 to 60 minutes and was audio-recorded with the participants' permission to ensure accuracy and completeness. The flexible format of the interviews allowed participants to elaborate on their teaching practices, share specific examples, and reflect on the challenges they regularly encountered.

To support and triangulate the interview data, classroom observations were also conducted using a checklist adapted from Qodriyah (2016) and Aly et al. (2024). To ensure the validity and reliability of the instrument, the observation checklist was subjected to expert judgment validation by two senior lecturers specializing in TEYL methodology. A total of nine observation aspects were conducted over a period of two weeks, with each teacher being observed one time. Non-participatory observation was applied, meaning the researcher did not interact with the teachers or students during the observation process.

The observations were conducted in three English classes at different grade levels. Structured observation techniques, combining observation checklists and narrative field notes, were used to document teacher-student interactions, classroom management, teaching methods, instructional media, and student engagement during lessons. Before the data collection process, the participants were informed about the purpose of the research and agreed to participate voluntarily, with institutional ethical clearance and written informed consent obtained beforehand. To maintain confidentiality, the participants' identities were represented using initials throughout the study.

The data, consisting of interview transcripts and observation notes, were analyzed thematically using the framework proposed by (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis process involved several steps, starting from familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, grouping the codes into categories, and finally developing overarching themes. These themes represented recurring patterns and significant insights about the pedagogical challenges faced by teachers and their strategies for addressing them. The thematic analysis helped establish meaningful connections between teachers' stated beliefs, observed classroom practices, and the contextual challenges they experienced during the teaching process.

To ensure the trustworthiness and credibility of the findings, several validation strategies were applied. Data triangulation was carried out by comparing the information obtained from interviews and classroom observations to ensure consistency and accuracy (Cresswell & Poth, 2016). Member checking was conducted by sharing the initial findings with the participants to allow them to review and confirm the interpretations. In addition, thick descriptions of the school context and classroom settings were provided to help readers understand the environmental factors shaping the teachers' experiences (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), to support the transferability of the findings (Berger, 2015). These measures ensured that the results accurately represented the authentic experiences and pedagogical challenges of the participating teachers.

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FINDINGS

This section presents the research findings based on data collected from semi-structured interviews and classroom observations involving three English teachers at Al-Ulum Islamic School, Pekanbaru. The results are thematically organized to illustrate two major focuses, such as the pedagogical challenges teachers encountered and the instructional adjustments they implemented based on students' language abilities. Direct excerpts from participants are integrated with supporting classroom observations to highlight how these experiences appeared in practice.

Pedagogical Challenges in TEYL

This part describes the key challenges faced by teachers in teaching English to young learners, which are categorized into five sub-themes.

Differences in Student Abilities Within a Class

The first theme captures the systematic challenges teachers face in addressing the diverse levels of English proficiency among students within the same classroom environment. The empirical data obtained from both interviews and classroom observations revealed that mixed-ability conditions made it difficult for teachers to balance lesson content so that both advanced and weaker learners could participate meaningfully.

Table 1

Data on Students' Varied Abilities (Interviews and Observations)

Interview Excerpt	Interpretation	Observation Evidence
"The students' abilities are different… although the learning becomes uneven." (P1)	Students have different levels of prior exposure; lessons progress unevenly and require differentiation.	In Grade 1, some students completed the craft task quickly while others needed repeated guidance.
"There are children whose basic English is already there… according to their basics." (P2)	Lessons must be levelled according to students' different starting points.	In Grade 3, some confidently sang the vocabulary song while others remained passive during pair games.
"Some students are already advanced… most are at an average or below-average level." (P3)	Most students are at average or lower levels, creating gaps within the class.	In Grade 6, higher-level students could produce full sentences, while others relied on prompts and slides.

The empirical findings from Table 1 demonstrate that teachers at Al-Ulum Islamic School consistently encounter highly heterogeneous classrooms. The data show a clear gap between students who have received early English exposure outside of school and those who rely entirely on classroom instruction, which directly influences the overall pacing of the lessons.

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Limited Time and Heavy Teaching Load

This theme refers to the structural constraints caused by limited instructional hours for English and teachers' heavy workloads, which include teaching multiple non-language subjects.

Table 2

Data on Limited Time and Workload (Interviews and Observations)

Interview Excerpt	Interpretation	Observation Evidence
"There is a lack of time… there are six subjects to teach." (P1)	Heavy workload reduces preparation time for English teaching.	In Grade 1, songs, crafts, and cleanup all had to fit into a single short session.
"The learning time in elementary school is only 70 minutes… about 50 minutes." (P2)	Short instructional time limits opportunities for in-depth learning.	In Grade 3, vocabulary games were shortened to fit within time limits.
"There are many activities that we have to develop." (P3)	Multiple responsibilities reduce focus on English instruction.	In Grade 6, slower pacing for weaker learners reduced practice time for advanced ones.

As documented in Table 2, the instructional time allocated for English lessons is highly restricted, often compromised by the need to complete administrative duties or transition between varied subjects. This structural limitation prevents teachers from providing sustained individualized assistance to struggling young learners.

Limited Resources and Professional Training

This theme highlights the scarcity of ready-made, TEYL-specific instructional resources and the lack of systemic professional development opportunities provided by the institution.

Table 3

Data on Limited Resources and Training (Interviews and Observations)

Interview Excerpt	Interpretation	Observation Evidence
"There is no training specifically for teaching English… from social media." (P1)	Lack of TEYL-specific training and reliance on informal sources.	In Grade 1, the teacher created her own craft-based materials from recycled items.
"A young learners' training program… would be very helpful." (P2)	Teachers feel the need for institutional training support.	In Grade 3, the teacher used self-made flashcards and songs.
"We don't have many teaching aids… PowerPoint slides." (P3)	Teachers must produce their own media due to limited materials.	In Grade 6, the teacher designed her own slides and prompts.

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The data in Table 3 indicate that the school does not provide specialized teaching aids for early childhood language acquisition. Consequently, teachers are required to invest personal time and effort to source, create, and adapt their own media from open-access online platforms.

Difficulty Maintaining Motivation and Participation

This theme describes how teachers struggle to sustain young learners' cognitive focus and active involvement throughout the lesson, particularly among passive or low-confidence students.

Table 4

Data on Difficulty Maintaining Motivation and Participation (Interviews and Observations)

Interview Excerpt	Interpretation	Observation Evidence
"Most of our children are not active… to help their friends become more active." (P1)	Many students are passive; teachers use peers to boost engagement.	In Grade 1, shy students were encouraged to join group craft activities.
"Sometimes they're not in the mood… enthusiastic about learning." (P2)	Teachers must stimulate students' interest to engage them.	In Grade 3, songs and games increased participation in vocabulary tasks.
"For those who don't understand… I have to call on them." (P3)	Low confidence prevents participation without teacher prompting.	In Grade 6, alternating group and individual questioning drew in quiet students.

Table 4 highlights that maintaining student interest is a fluctuating process that depends heavily on the children's emotional mood and language comprehension levels. Teachers are continuously required to invent interactive triggers to prevent disengagement.

Curriculum Obstacles

This theme captures how the loose structure and flexibility of the Merdeka Curriculum often conflict with students' practical readiness, complicating long-term lesson planning.

Table 5

Data on Curriculum Obstacles (Interviews and Observations)

Interview Excerpt	Interpretation	Observation Evidence
"It should be tailored to the students." (P1)	The curriculum must be adapted to students' readiness.	In Grade 1, thematic hands on projects were used instead of textbook-only lessons.
"Sometimes the teacher has to change the lesson… format changes." (P2)	Constant curriculum changes complicate lesson planning.	In Grade 3, songs and pair tasks were added to simplify vocabulary learning.

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"The Merdeka Curriculum is too liberating… hard to ensure mastery." (P3)	Lack of structured standards creates difficulty in ensuring mastery.	In Grade 6, the teacher focused on practical vocabulary to suit varied abilities.

The findings presented in Table 5 suggest that, while the current national curriculum allows for autonomy, the absence of clear, standardized benchmarks creates uncertainty about the specific mastery requirements for young language learners.

Teachers' Adjustments Based on Students' Language Abilities

This section presents the strategies teachers use to address the mixed ability levels of their students. They used various adaptations to support both weaker and more advanced learners.

Differentiating Materials and Activities

This theme refers to how teachers modified content difficulty to ensure that all students could engage meaningfully, regardless of their ability level.

Table 6

Data on Differentiating Materials and Activities (Interviews and Observations)

Interview Excerpt	Interpretation	Observation Evidence
"Children entering elementary school aren't required to be good at reading… activities in kindergarten." (P1)	Lessons are simplified to suit students' early developmental stage.	In Grade 1, vocabulary was taught through crafts with simple instructions.
"We level the lessons according to the students' basic skills… adjust to their needs." (P2)	Lessons are tailored to varied skill levels.	In Grade 3, a song was followed by pair vocabulary tasks at different difficulty levels.
"We just adjust to the students' ability." (P3)	Teachers modify content based on individual ability.	In Grade 6, simpler sentence frames were given to weaker students.

Teachers adjusted the complexity of content to ensure both stronger and weaker learners could participate meaningfully.

Varied Strategies and Media

This theme illustrates the teachers' use of multiple teaching strategies and media to sustain student interest and suit different learning styles.

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Table 7

Data on Varied Strategies and Media (Interviews and Observations)

Interview Excerpt	Interpretation	Observation Evidence
"The strategies that make them active are usually games… short movie. Without text." (P3)	Games and visual media help sustain student attention.	In Grade 6, slides and illustrations were used along with group practice.
"Sometimes at the beginning we can't go straight into the material… give a video first." (P2)	Teachers adapt strategies based on students' moods and interests.	In Grade 3, the teacher combined songs, flashcards, and pair games.

Teachers regularly varied their teaching strategies and media to sustain engagement and support different learning styles.

Using Students as Models or Leaders

This theme shows how teachers positioned more confident students as peer models to encourage and guide their less proficient classmates.

Table 8

Data on Using Students as Models or Leaders (Interviews and Observations)

Interview Excerpt	Interpretation	Observation Evidence
"The active ones are the ones we model for each group… like he is a teacher." (P1)	Confident students are positioned as role models for peers.	In Grade 1, stronger students demonstrated tasks during group crafts.
"The ones who like it and are good at it go first… later the others will follow." (P3)	Peer leadership motivates weaker learners to join activities.	In Grade 6, advanced students modeled sentences before others attempted them.

Positioning stronger students as leaders helped increase participation and encouraged weaker learners to attempt tasks with peer support.

Adjusting Assessment Practices

This theme refers to how teachers modified assessment tasks to accommodate students' varied abilities, often prioritizing oral over written tasks.

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Table 9

Data on Adjusting Assessment Practices (Interviews and Observations)

Interview Excerpt	Interpretation	Observation Evidence
"Most of the children write, but the lower grades rarely write—mostly repeating speech." (P1)	Young learners are assessed more through oral performance.	In Grade 1, oral assessments were embedded in songs and crafts.
"For slow learners… some do not finish." (P2)	Writing tasks are difficult for slower learners.	In Grade 3, pair vocabulary performances replaced long writing tasks.
"For writing, I often forgive mistakes… it's okay." (P3)	Teachers lower their strictness to support students' confidence.	In Grade 6, oral tasks with visual prompts were used instead of written tests.

Teachers adapted the assessment to match students' varying abilities, using more oral tasks, simplifying requirements, and giving more time to complete tasks.

DISCUSSION

This research revealed various pedagogical challenges faced by teachers in teaching English to young learners, particularly concerning the differences in student abilities within a class. Similar findings were reported by Aprilia et al. (2023), who found that varied language abilities require teachers to apply differentiated instructional approaches so that all students can participate effectively in learning activities. In the context of this research, differences in students' abilities influenced not only classroom participation but also teachers' decisions in selecting materials, organizing activities, and adjusting instructional strategies. This finding highlights the importance of adaptive learning practices in TEYL classrooms, especially when students demonstrate different levels of readiness and confidence. In contrast to Abdul Rahim & Chun (2017), who emphasize affective dimensions in responding to student diversity, this research also highlights the cognitive challenge of developing learning materials suited to students' varying abilities.

Furthermore, the limited instructional time and teachers' heavy workloads pose significant barriers to the practice of teaching English in this school. Akmal et al. (2022) similarly stated that limited time and heavy administrative duties restrict teachers' capacity to design deep and creative learning activities. In this research, time limitations affected teachers' opportunities to provide individualized support and implement more interactive learning activities consistently. Classroom observations showed that teachers often had to simplify activities, shorten games, or reduce practice opportunities to fit the available instructional time. Different from Reynolds et al. (2021), who focus more on the teacher's self-confidence as a major factor for effective early English learning, this study emphasizes the influence of school operational contexts and workload on teachers' instructional decisions and classroom practices.

As a response to these obstacles, teachers implemented various instructional strategies and media such as songs, short videos, and games to stimulate students' interest and involvement. These strategies were not only used to increase motivation but also to help teachers maintain classroom participation and manage students with different levels of confidence and

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engagement. This approach aligns with Garton & Copland (2018), who emphasize the need for pedagogical innovation to maintain children's motivation and focus, and Mishra & Koehler (2016), who stress the integration of technological, pedagogical, and content knowledge (TPACK) to optimize learning effectiveness despite limited time.

Another challenge that emerged is the limited resources and the lack of professional training specific to teaching English to young learners. Aprilia et al. (2023) also found that teachers often rely on informal sources and self-made materials due to the absence of specialized support and professional development opportunities. This is in line with Virgianti et al. (2020) that revealed that limited access to TEYL-focused training affected teachers' classroom practices and instructional preparation. As shown in the observations and interviews, teachers frequently depended on self-prepared media, online references, and personal creativity to adapt learning materials to students' needs. These findings indicate that limited institutional support influences not only teachers' access to resources but also the amount of preparation and improvisation required in daily teaching practice.

Another challenge identified in this research was the difficulty in maintaining students' motivation and active participation during learning. Marzulina et al. (2021) also identified low motivation as a primary issue in boarding school environments. In this research, students' motivation appeared closely related to their confidence levels, classroom mood, and differences in language ability. As a result, teachers needed to continuously adjust activities and vary instructional approaches to maintain participation and engagement during lessons. In contrast with Qodriyah (2016), who focuses more on improving teacher competence and classroom management, this research emphasizes peer modeling as a practical strategy to encourage participation and build students' confidence in TEYL classrooms.

Moreover, the flexible nature of the Merdeka Curriculum has become a challenge because rapid policy changes and unclear guidelines make it difficult for teachers to plan appropriate lessons and ensure consistent mastery of the material. Fitria (2023) similarly emphasizes rapid and uncertain curriculum changes as operational barriers in classroom practice. In this research, curriculum flexibility often required teachers to repeatedly modify activities, simplify materials, and adapt assessment practices according to students' readiness and classroom conditions. Contrastingly, Virgianti et al. (2020) reveal a gap between teachers' perceptions and practices in implementing pedagogical content knowledge, indicating that teacher competence and classroom management are crucial factors for successful curriculum adaptation.

Overall, the findings confirm that pedagogical challenges in teaching English for young learners are multidimensional, involving cognitive, affective, and contextual aspects that are interrelated, as emphasized by the theories of Shulman (1987), Bandura (1977), and Vygotskiĭ & Cole (1978). Therefore, professional development programs for teachers are needed to focus on flexibility in designing learning, innovation in diverse strategies and media, and the use of technology as a pedagogical tool. In addition, establishing a collaborative learning environment that empowers students as models, along with clear curriculum policies and guidelines, is a key factor in facilitating the effective and sustainable implementation of TEYL.

CONCLUSIONS

This research concludes that English teachers at Al-Ulum Islamic School face several pedagogical challenges in implementing Teaching English for Young Learners (TEYL). These

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findings suggest that pedagogical challenges in TEYL are closely connected to contextual and institutional conditions, including workload demands, curriculum expectations, limited professional support, and students' diverse learning readiness. These conditions required teachers to make numerous instructional adjustments, such as simplifying lesson content, differentiating tasks, using varied media and strategies like songs, games, and visuals, assigning confident students as peer models, and adapting assessments to suit different ability levels. While these adaptations helped address classroom challenges, the teachers' efforts were still constrained by limited institutional support, facilities, and professional development opportunities.

This research highlights the urgent need for structured TEYL training programs and stronger support systems to help teachers apply effective and developmentally appropriate English teaching practices in Islamic school settings. However, this research only involved a small number of teachers from one school, so the findings may not represent broader TEYL contexts. Future research could explore similar challenges in different school types or regions, investigate the effectiveness of teacher training programs, and include students' perspectives to provide a more complete understanding of classroom dynamics in TEYL contexts.

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Authorship Contribution Statement

All authors made significant contributions to the conception and design of the study, data acquisition, analysis, and interpretation. Farikha Alifia Ruqoyah, Afrianto Daud, and Hadriana drafted the manuscript, and all authors critically revised it for important intellectual content. All authors approved the final manuscript and take responsibility for the integrity of the work.

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