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THE STRATEGIES USED BY ENGLISH TEACHERS OF SMK TARUNA PEKANBARU IN TEACHING ENGLISH

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Abstract

English plays a central role in global communication and education, making effective teaching strategies essential to support students' language development. However, teaching English in non-English-speaking contexts, such as Indonesia, remains challenging, particularly in vocational schools, where academic subjects often receive less emphasis than technical training. This study investigates the strategies employed by English teachers of SMK Taruna Pekanbaru in teaching English and explores the challenges their encountered in the classroom. Using a descriptive qualitative design, data were collected through classroom observations and interviews involving three English teachers. The findings revealed that Teacher 1 applied a combination of expository and inquiry-based strategies, whereas Teachers 2 and 3 consistently implemented inquiry learning approaches. While inquiry strategies encouraged critical thinking, collaboration, and active participation, the expository method was useful for providing clarity, especially for students with lower academic ability. Despite these efforts, teachers faced obstacles such as limited instructional time, low student motivation, and inadequate learning facilities. The results highlighted that although teachers adapted strategies to meet classroom needs, structural constraints within the semi-military vocational school environment restrict the effectiveness of English instruction. This study contributes to the growing literature on English language teaching strategies in vocational contexts and offers insights for educators, policymakers, and future researchers seeking to improve language learning outcomes in similar educational settings.

Keywords: *Teaching Strategies, Inquiry Learning, Expository Learning, Vocational School, English Instruction*

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INTRODUCTION

English has become one of the most widely spoken languages in the world and is increasingly used as a medium of communication in business, education, and academic discourse. In Indonesia, English is taught as a compulsory subject from elementary to higher education, with private schools often introducing it even earlier (Al-Sobhi & Preece, 2018). Given its importance, the success of English teaching largely depends on teachers' ability to employ appropriate strategies to make the subject engaging and comprehensible. Teachers play a pivotal role not only in transmitting knowledge but also in fostering students' interest and motivation, which are essential for language acquisition (Iksan & Dirham, 2018).

In the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), the selection of teaching strategies becomes even more crucial because students often have limited exposure to English outside the classroom. Effective teaching strategies can help create meaningful learning experiences, encourage student participation, and improve language proficiency through interactive and contextualized activities (Richards & Renandya, 2002). In vocational schools, however, English teaching faces additional challenges due to students' stronger focus on technical and practical subjects related to their vocational majors. As a result, English is sometimes perceived as less important, leading to low motivation and limited engagement during classroom instruction. Therefore, English teachers in vocational education are required not only to master the subject matter but also to apply flexible and appropriate teaching strategies that can accommodate students' needs, classroom conditions, and institutional contexts. By using appropriate strategies, teachers can create a more supportive learning environment that helps students understand and apply English in both academic and vocational settings.

Previous studies have shown that effective teaching strategies, such as inquiry-based and student-centered learning, can enhance students' participation, motivation, and critical thinking (Avsec & Kocijancic, 2016; Harlen, 2013). Other approaches, such as expository teaching, remain valuable for ensuring clarity and structure (Majid, 2013). Research in diverse contexts, including Brunei (Amjah, 2014), Segedong (Mustika & Wardah, 2021), and Bone (Zaid et al., 2019), highlights that teachers often adapt strategies based on institutional culture, student characteristics, and available resources. While these studies underline the importance of strategy in English teaching, relatively few have examined vocational schools with semi-military orientations, where English often receives limited instructional time and faces additional challenges such as low student motivation and inadequate facilities.

In addition, the uniqueness of vocational schools with semi-military systems creates a distinct learning environment that may influence both teachers' instructional decisions and students' learning behaviors. In such institutions, discipline, physical training, and vocational competence are often prioritized, which can reduce students' attention toward academic subjects such as English. Consequently, English teachers are required to balance classroom discipline with interactive learning activities that encourage communication and participation. Despite the growing interest in English teaching strategies in vocational education, there is still limited research exploring how teachers in semi-military vocational schools adapt their strategies to overcome contextual constraints. Therefore, investigating the strategies used by English teachers in this context is important to provide a deeper understanding of practical classroom implementation and to contribute to the development of more effective English teaching practices in vocational education settings.

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This study focuses on the strategies used by English teachers of SMK Taruna Pekanbaru, a vocational semi-military school, in teaching English. It also investigates the challenges they face in applying these strategies. The study seeks to provide insights into how English teachers adapt pedagogical approaches within a constrained educational environment, thereby contributing both theoretically to English language teaching research and practically to the improvement of instructional practices in similar contexts.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research design because it aimed to explore and describe the teaching strategies used by English teachers in their natural classroom settings without manipulating any variables. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate since it allows researchers to gain a deeper understanding of participants' experiences, perspectives, and instructional practices within a particular educational context (Creswell, 2014).

Through this approach, the researcher investigated how teachers implemented different teaching strategies, the reasons behind their instructional choices, and the challenges they encountered during the teaching and learning process. Furthermore, descriptive qualitative research emphasizes interpreting phenomena from real classroom settings, making it well-suited to examining teaching practices in vocational and semi-military school environments. The data in this study were collected through classroom observations and structured interviews. Classroom observations were conducted to identify the actual strategies applied by teachers during English instruction, while structured interviews were used to obtain more detailed information regarding teachers' perspectives, experiences, and considerations in selecting and applying specific teaching strategies.

Participants

The participants of this study were English teachers at SMK Taruna Pekanbaru. Initially, four English teachers were identified as potential participants; however, one teacher declined to participate in the study. Consequently, the study involved three English teachers, identified as T1, T2, and T3, as the research participants. The participants were selected because they were actively involved in teaching English and considered capable of providing relevant information on implementing teaching strategies in the classroom.

Data collection was conducted during February and March 2025. Each teacher was observed three times during their classroom teaching sessions to obtain comprehensive and consistent data on their instructional practices. During the observation process, the researcher used field notes to record classroom interactions, teaching procedures, students' responses, and the strategies employed by the teachers throughout the lessons. In addition to classroom observations, structured interviews were conducted with each participant to validate and enrich the observational data. The interviews provided deeper insights into the teachers' pedagogical considerations, decision-making processes, perceptions of students' learning needs, and the challenges they encountered in implementing particular teaching strategies within the vocational and semi-military school context.

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Data Collection Method(s) and Analysis

The data in this study were analyzed using the interactive model proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), which involves four interconnected stages: data collection, data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing or verification. During the data collection stage, the researcher gathered information through classroom observations and structured interviews with the participants. The collected data were then reduced by selecting, focusing on, and organizing relevant information about the teaching strategies used by the English teachers and the challenges they encountered in the classroom.

After the reduction process, the data were presented as descriptive explanations, categorized findings, and thematic interpretations to make the information easier to understand and analyze. Finally, conclusions were drawn and continuously verified throughout the research process to ensure the credibility and consistency of the findings. This interactive analysis process enabled the researcher to identify recurring patterns, compare instructional strategies among the three teachers, interpret the contextual factors influencing their teaching practices, and connect the findings with relevant theories and previous studies in the field of English language teaching.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Findings

Teaching Strategies

Observations and interviews revealed that the three teachers employed distinct strategies reflecting their individual teaching orientations and the contextual realities of SMK Taruna Pekanbaru. Although inquiry-based learning was the dominant strategy, variations in implementation showed that each teacher exercised professional flexibility and adaptation to student needs.

Teacher 1 (Combination of Expository and Inquiry Learning Strategies)

Teacher 1 predominantly relied on expository teaching, supported by clear explanations and structured guidance, before transitioning to group or inquiry tasks. In classroom observations, T1 frequently began lessons by writing key points on the blackboard and explaining the material step by step. He emphasized that many students required firm direction before engaging in discussions. As T1 explained:

> "Saya biasanya memulai dengan menjelaskan materi terlebih dahulu sebelum memberikan tugas individu atau kelompok. Banyak dari siswa saya yang masih membutuhkan penjelasan yang jelas sebelum mereka bisa berdiskusi dengan baik. Kalau saya langsung suruh mereka eksplorasi tanpa arahan, mereka malah bingung dan tidak fokus."
>
> *"I usually begin by explaining the material first before giving individual or group tasks. Many of my students still need clear explanations before they can discuss effectively. If I*

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let them explore without any guidance, they often get confused and lose focus."

This statement indicates that T1 was aware of her students' learning needs and classroom realities. She recognized that most of them lacked sufficient background knowledge, which made expository explanation a necessary starting point. However, she still incorporated inquiry elements—such as discussion and problem-solving activities—to enhance engagement and critical thinking. This mixed strategy reflects Majid's (2013) assertion that expository teaching remains efficient when instructional time is limited. At the same time, her adaptation to include inquiry aligns with the 2013 Curriculum's student-centered learning principles. Thus, T1's practice demonstrates a pragmatic balance between structure and exploration, ensuring both comprehension and active participation.

Teacher 2 (Inquiry-Focused Learning Strategies)

Teacher 2 consistently adopted an inquiry-based learning strategies throughout her lessons. Observations showed students working collaboratively to analyze vocationally relevant materials, search for information, and present their findings through dialogues and discussions. T2 believed that students should not passively absorb knowledge but discover it through exploration and collaboration. She stated:

> "Saya ingin siswa belajar menemukan sendiri. Mereka tidak hanya menghafal tata bahasa, tapi juga memahami bagaimana menggunakannya dalam kehidupan nyata. Misalnya, ketika kita belajar tentang percakapan di tempat kerja, saya biarkan mereka membuat dialog sesuai konteks jurusan mereka."
>
> *"I want my students to learn by discovering on their own. They are not only memorizing grammar but also learning how to use it in real-life situations. For example, when we study workplace communication, I let them create dialogues relevant to their vocational field."*

T2 strategy demonstrates a strong alignment with inquiry-based learning principles, which emphasize learner autonomy and contextual understanding. By linking English lessons to students' vocational realities, T2 fostered authenticity and motivation—factors often lacking in EFL classrooms (Richards & Renandya, 2002). This practice resonates with Harlen's (2013) view that inquiry promotes deeper understanding as students actively construct meaning through exploration. Compared to T1, T2's approach showed a stronger commitment to learner-centered pedagogy and the spirit of the 2013 Curriculum.

Teacher 3 (Inquiry with Expository Support for Complex Topics)

Teacher 3 also favored inquiry learning but combined it with expository instruction, especially when addressing difficult grammatical concepts. During observation, she guided students to analyze texts, identify patterns, and draw conclusions through questioning. However, when introducing abstract or challenging grammar topics, she switched to direct explanation. She clarified:

> "Saya tidak langsung memberikan materi begitu saja. Biasanya saya ajak siswa berpikir dulu, misalnya dengan pertanyaan yang membuat mereka mencari jawabannya. Tapi

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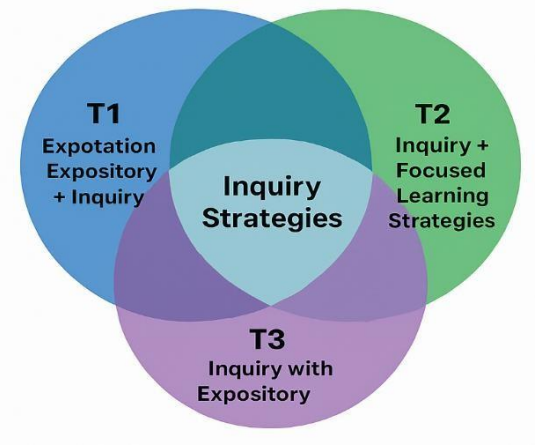
kalau materinya sulit seperti grammar, ya tetap saya jelaskan dulu supaya mereka paham dasarnya."

"I don't immediately present the material. Usually, I encourage students to think first by asking questions that lead them to find the answers. But when the topic is difficult, such as grammar, I still explain it first so they can understand the basics."

This balanced approach demonstrated a sophisticated understanding of pedagogical flexibility. Teacher 3's strategy supports Brown's (2001) assertion that effective teaching combines fluency-oriented and accuracy-oriented activities. Her practice showed that inquiry is not a fixed method but one that can be adapted according to student readiness and content complexity. This adaptability reflects teacher agency and responsiveness to classroom realities.

Figure 1

Overlap of Teaching among T1, T2, T3



The Venn diagram illustrates the distinct yet interconnected teaching strategies employed by the three English teachers (T1, T2, and T3) at SMK Taruna Pekanbaru. All teachers integrate inquiry-based learning as the central approach, emphasizing student participation, exploration, and critical thinking. However, each teacher combines inquiry with other strategies based on their instructional context. T1 applies a combination of expository and inquiry strategies, using direct explanation and modeling alongside guided discovery, especially when introducing new topics or explaining language structures. T2, on the other hand, adopts inquiry supported by focusing learning strategies such as drilling, peer correction, and scaffolded questioning, which aim to foster learner autonomy and reflective learning. Meanwhile, T3 primarily employs inquiry-based instruction but selectively incorporates expository explanations to clarify complex or abstract material.

Although all three teachers share inquiry as the core element of their practice, the purpose and proportion of inquiry differ across them. Inquiry serves as the foundation for developing students' critical thinking, problem-solving, and engagement. For T1, inquiry is used to activate students' understanding after the teacher's explanation. For T2, inquiry helps students build reflection and independence in learning. Meanwhile, T3 uses inquiry as a means of exploration, yet still relies on expository explanations when topics become too difficult. These variations reflect the teachers' flexibility, creativity, and contextual awareness in aligning their instructional choices with students' needs and learning contexts.

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Challenges in Teaching

Although the teachers demonstrated adaptability in using varied strategies, several contextual challenges influenced their strategy choices.

Low Proficiency and Motivation

Most students came from rural areas with limited exposure to English, resulting in low motivation and limited comprehension. As T1 explained:

> "Banyak siswa kami berasal dari daerah pedesaan, jadi mereka jarang sekali berinteraksi dengan bahasa Inggris. Kalau di rumah atau di lingkungan mereka, hampir tidak ada yang menggunakan bahasa Inggris sama sekali. Jadi wajar kalau kemampuan mereka masih rendah dan sering kesulitan memahami instruksi dalam bahasa Inggris."
>
> *"Many of our students come from rural areas, so they rarely interact with English. At home or in their surroundings, almost no one uses English at all. So it's understandable that their proficiency is still low, and they often struggle to understand English instructions."*

T2 added:

> "Anak-anak di sini belum terbiasa mendengar atau menggunakan bahasa Inggris. Jadi, minat mereka untuk belajar rendah, dan kalau diberi tugas berbahasa Inggris, banyak yang langsung menyerah."
>
> *"The students here are not used to hearing or using English. Their interest in learning is low, and when given English-based assignments, many of them immediately give up."*

This issue reflects a common challenge in EFL contexts, where minimal exposure outside the classroom limits opportunities for language input and practice (Richards & Renandya, 2002). Consequently, teachers must modify their methods not only to deliver content but also to build students' confidence and interest in learning English.

Limited Instructional Time

Based on the school's transitional curriculum, English instruction was allocated two hours per week for the tenth and eleventh grades under the Kurikulum Merdeka, and three hours per week for the twelfth grade under the 2013 Curriculum (K-13). Due to the school's heavy emphasis on vocational and military training, these limited timeframes forced teachers to prioritize efficiency, often reverting to expository teaching for clarity. The reduced time for communicative practice made it difficult to fully implement inquiry learning, reinforcing the need for blended approaches.

Classroom Management

Given the predominantly male student population, maintaining discipline and focus was another major issue. As one teacher expressed:

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> "Kadang sulit mengendalikan siswa laki-laki, apalagi kalau jam terakhir atau mereka sedang lelah latihan. Kelas jadi ramai dan susah dikontrol."
>
> *"Sometimes it's hard to manage the male students, especially during the last period or after physical training. The class becomes noisy and difficult to control."*

Effective classroom management is vital for inquiry-based learning, which requires active participation and collaboration. This aligns with Hamdayana's (2016) observation that inquiry teaching can be challenging in environments where discipline dominates learning culture.

Repetition and Diverse Learning Needs

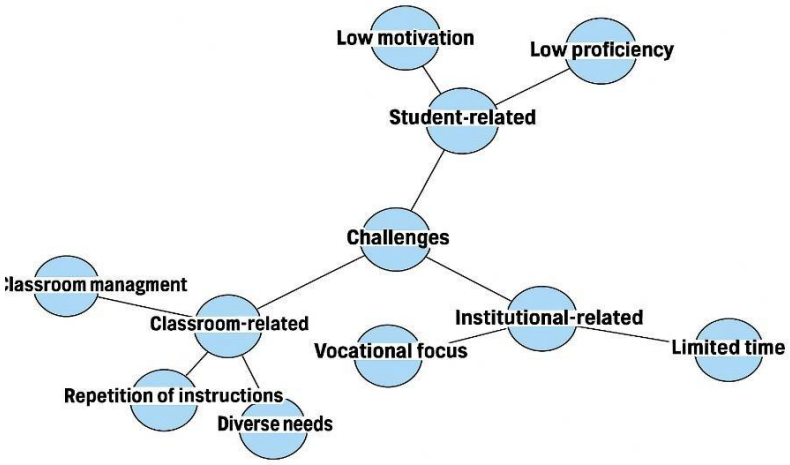
Teachers frequently had to repeat explanations multiple times due to varying comprehension levels. Moreover, the heterogeneity of the classroom meant that not all students responded equally well to the same strategies. One teacher elaborated:

> "Tidak semua siswa cocok dengan strategi yang saya pakai. Ada yang cepat paham, tapi ada juga yang perlu dijelaskan berkali-kali. Misalnya, kalau saya pakai metode diskusi, ada beberapa siswa yang aktif, tapi sebagian lain malah diam saja karena belum mengerti. Kadang saya harus ubah jadi latihan berpasangan atau saya dampingi langsung biar mereka ikut terlibat."
>
> *"Not all students fit the strategy I use. Some understand quickly, but others need multiple explanations. For example, when I use the discussion method, some students are active, but others remain silent because they don't understand yet. Sometimes I have to switch to pair work or personally assist them so they can participate."*

This diversity reinforces Richards and Renandya's (2002) notion that heterogeneous classrooms require flexibility and creativity. The teachers' ability to adjust and combine approaches demonstrates their professional competence and responsiveness to students' needs, especially in a semi-military environment where learning styles and discipline levels vary significantly.

Figure 2

Cluster Diagram of Challenges in Teaching English



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Discussions

The findings of this study revealed that inquiry-based learning emerged as the most dominant teaching strategy among the English teachers of SMK Taruna Pekanbaru. This dominance strongly corresponds to the emphasis of the 2013 Curriculum (Kurikulum, 2013), which promotes student-centered learning, critical thinking, and the development of learners' problem-solving abilities (Mulyono, 2016; Trinova, 2013). The teachers' implementation of inquiry-based strategies demonstrates their pedagogical awareness of the importance of learner autonomy, engagement, and contextualized language use. Throughout the classroom observations and interviews, students were actively involved in exploring, questioning, and applying linguistic knowledge to vocational contexts. This pattern indicates that inquiry functioned not merely as a technique, but as a pedagogical philosophy aligned with constructivist learning principles (Avsec & Kocijancic, 2016; Harlen, 2013).

Although inquiry remains the dominant strategy, the study also reveals that the expository strategy continues to play an important role in classroom practice. Both Teacher 1 and Teacher 3 used direct explanations and structured guidance in their lessons, indicating a deliberate effort to maintain pedagogical balance. This combination of strategies aligns with Brown's (2001) concept of "principled eclecticism", where teachers adapt their methods to suit students' diverse needs. In vocational EFL settings, where learners often have mixed proficiency levels and need clear guidance, expository teaching offers crucial support through scaffolding and language modeling. This finding supports Majid's (2013) view that the expository strategy remains valuable, particularly when instructional time is limited or when students lack prior knowledge. Likewise, Richards and Rodgers (2014) argue that teacher-centered approaches are not necessarily ineffective but can serve as complementary tools to ensure conceptual understanding before students engage in inquiry-based activities.

Moreover, the teachers' choice of teaching strategies was strongly influenced by contextual and institutional factors. These factors, including low student motivation, limited exposure to English outside the classroom, and restricted instructional time, emerged as the main considerations shaping their pedagogical decisions. Inquiry-based instruction proved most effective when students showed adequate motivation and readiness to engage; however, expository strategies became essential for addressing conceptual challenges and maintaining classroom control, especially in large or less responsive groups. These results are consistent with the findings of Mustika and Wardah (2021) and Zaid et al. (2019), who observed that teaching English in vocational or semi-military schools requires balancing innovation with practicality. In such settings, strict discipline, limited time, and the dominance of technical subjects often constrain the implementation of fully communicative or inquiry-oriented approaches (Kurniawan, 2022; Rahmawati, 2020).

The synthesis of these findings can be seen in the following table, which summarizes the dominant strategies, key challenges, and pedagogical implications identified among the teachers:

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Table 1

Summary of Teachers' Strategies, Challenges, and Implications

Teacher	Dominant Strategy	Key Challenges	Implications for Teaching
T1	Mixed (Expository + Inquiry)	Students need clear explanations before given tasks; low proficiency	Balance clarity with active engagement; expository ensures efficiency, inquiry promotes participation
T2	Inquiry-based	Low motivation; limited class hours; diverse abilities	Inquiry promotes relevance and critical thinking, but needs scaffolding to suit varied student levels
T3	Inquiry (with Expository for grammar)	Classroom management (male students), repetition of instructions	Flexible adaptation needed; inquiry builds autonomy, expository ensures understanding of complex topics

As shown in Table 1, although inquiry-based learning was the dominant strategy, the teachers demonstrated flexibility by incorporating expository elements when necessary. This approach reflects the principle of pedagogical flexibility—teachers' capacity to adjust instruction according to specific contexts and learner needs (Borg, 2015). The findings suggest that effective EFL teaching in vocational settings requires a balance between teacher guidance and learner autonomy, rather than strict adherence to a single method. The teachers' adaptations also illustrate professional judgment, reflective practice, and responsiveness to learners' linguistic and emotional needs. Furthermore, these instructional adjustments indicate that teachers' choices were not only shaped by pedagogical beliefs but also by contextual realities such as student characteristics, institutional expectations, and time limitations.

Overall, this study contributes to the broader discourse on English teaching in semi-military and vocational education by illustrating how teachers reconcile curriculum ideals with classroom realities. The integration of inquiry and expository strategies represents not only methodological flexibility but also the teachers' agency, creativity, and contextual awareness. These qualities are essential for achieving meaningful learning outcomes in constrained educational environments. Consistent with the principles of reflective teaching (Farrell, 2013), the practices of teachers of SMK Taruna Pekanbaru show that effective instruction arises through ongoing adaptation—where inquiry functions as a guiding philosophy and expository strategy provides supportive scaffolding to ensure comprehension, engagement, and skill mastery among vocational learners.

CONCLUSIONS

This study concludes that English teachers of SMK Taruna Pekanbaru employed mixed strategies, expository and inquiry-based strategies, with variations shaped by teacher preference and classroom context. While expository strategy ensured clarity and efficiency, inquiry-based learning enhanced engagement and contextual relevance. Teachers faced challenges, including low proficiency, weak motivation, limited instructional hours, classroom management difficulties, and diverse learning levels.

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To address these issues, teachers should adopt adaptive strategies that balance clarity with active learning. Institutional support—such as increasing English instructional hours, providing resources, and offering professional training—is crucial for improving learning outcomes. The findings contribute to understanding English teaching practices in semi-military vocational schools and may serve as a reference for similar contexts.

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Authorship Contribution Statement:

All authors made significant contributions to the study's conception and design, data acquisition, analysis, and interpretation. Dwi Asmia Putri conceptualized the study, collected and analyzed data, and drafted the manuscript. Supriusman and Novitri revised it for important intellectual content and approved the final manuscript

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