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Meaning-Making in Genre-Based Pedagogy: An SFL Analysis of Descriptive Writing

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Abstract

The ability to construct meaning in descriptive writing is an essential skill for learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). However, many students still experience difficulties in generating ideas, expressing attitudes, and establishing coherence within their texts. Previous studies have primarily focused on the quality of the final written product, paying less attention to how students develop meaning-making abilities throughout the writing process. Therefore, this study aims to investigate how students construct ideational, interpersonal, and textual meaning. This study also examines the role of Genre-Based Pedagogy in supporting this process. Employing a qualitative case study design, the research was conducted at SMP Negeri 2 Limbangan Kendal, Central Java, involving 30 seventh-grade students. Data were collected through students' written texts, classroom observations, and semi-structured interviews, and were analyzed using the Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) framework with data triangulation. The findings reveal that students encountered challenges in using relational clauses, employing a wider range of evaluative vocabulary, developing thematic progression, and maintaining textual cohesion. These results suggest that students' meaning-making development remains uneven despite the support provided through modeling, joint construction, and explicit scaffolding. Future research is recommended to explore how meaning-making develops across a wider range of contexts and genres.

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Keywords: Genre-Based Pedagogy; Systemic Functional Linguistics; meaning-making; descriptive text; EFL students.

Introduction

In the last few years, writing instructions in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms have shifted their focus from getting students to simply produce grammatically correct sentences to developing their capability to make meaning. Descriptive writing has become one of the core genres in the curriculum of Indonesian junior high schools since it is the mode that most effectively allows learners to depict through language the people, places, and things around them. Nevertheless, a lot of students still have problems with coming up with ideas, formulating their points of view, and organizing their texts in a logical manner. In addition, these problems quite frequently lead to the production of descriptive texts that are poorly organized and lack coherence and communicative effectiveness. As writing is a meaning-making activity, it is crucial that we first understand the way students create meanings through their linguistic choices in order to enhance both the teaching of writing and the students' learning in EFL contexts.

Descriptive writing has been approached from a number of angles in previous studies. It has been found that EFL learners are prone to making mistakes with genus structure, cohesiveness, vocabulary use, and grammar when working on descriptive tasks. Some other researches have resorted to Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) to locate the similarities and differences in students' writings, with an emphasis on cohesiveness, discourse organization, or particular linguistic features. Besides that, the popularity of the Genre-Based Pedagogy approach among the academic community is growing because it has been able to significantly enhance students' writing performances mainly through providing explicit instructions, offering models, and encouraging collaborative construction activities. However, notwithstanding these efforts, the majority of the research has been oriented towards the end products or achievements and has largely ignored the meaning construction by students during the learning process that is characterized as gradual and continuous in first language being acquired.

This shortcoming points to a major research gap. While current studies offer valuable information about writing quality, linguistic aspects, and instructional techniques, they fall short of explaining how students create ideational, interpersonal, and textual meanings in their interaction with the materials during the adoption of Genre-Based Pedagogy. Moreover, there is still a lack of research which integrates SFL and Genre-Based Pedagogy at the level of junior high school, especially in descriptive writing classrooms. Consequently, the ways in which students are progressively filling up their linguistic toolkits and eventually mastering the difficulties associated with meaning-making have not been thoroughly examined yet. Exploring this question is of great importance not only because the purpose of Genre-Based Pedagogy is to raise students' writing standards, but also because it emphasizes providing learners with the support and guidance that they need in becoming competent meaning-makers through systematic language scaffolding and explicit education.

Accordingly, this research study aims to find out the ways in which grade seven students reveal their ideational, interpersonal, as well as textual meanings in descriptive writing by means of Genre-Based Pedagogy at SMP Negeri 2 Limbangan Kendal, Central Java. Drawing upon Systemic Functional Linguistics as the major theoretical framework, the research endeavor to find answers to the following three questions: (1) In what ways do students create ideational, interpersonal, and textual meanings in descriptive writing? (2) Which kinds of challenges do students face when making meanings? and (3) In what ways can Genre-Based Pedagogy help students in their meaning-making development?

Apart from analyzing students' writing, this work will look into pupils' classroom discussion and learning experiences in an attempt to reveal the nature and dynamics of meaning-making development in EFL writing classrooms. At the same time, it is hoped that the results will be helpful to teachers who are going to implement the Genre-Based Pedagogy in their descriptive writing classes.

Research Methods

1. Research Design

This study employed a qualitative discourse analysis approach to investigate students' meaning-making in descriptive writing through the implementation of Genre-Based Pedagogy (GBP). A qualitative approach was selected because the study focused on examining linguistic phenomena, meaning-making processes, and students' deployment of language resources within classroom writing activities in depth.

The study used M.A.K. Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) as the primary analytical framework to examine how students constructed meanings in their descriptive texts. Through SFL perspectives, the study analyzed how students organized experiential, interpersonal, and textual meanings through linguistic choices during descriptive writing activities.

The research focused on analyzing the development of students' linguistic resources throughout the teaching–learning cycle of Genre-Based Pedagogy, namely Modeling, Joint Construction, and Independent Construction stages. The analysis emphasized the three metafunctions of language in SFL: ideational, interpersonal, and textual meanings. Ideational meaning analysis examined students' representation of experiences through process types and participant structures, interpersonal meaning analysis explored students' appraisal resources and evaluative language, while textual meaning analysis investigated thematic progression, cohesion, and schematic organization.

The study was conducted as a classroom-based discourse investigation involving one seventh-grade classroom at SMP Negeri 2 Limbangan Kendal, Central Java. Through this design, the researcher was able to examine students' meaning-making development comprehensively by integrating writing products, classroom observation, and interview findings within authentic instructional contexts.

2. Participants

Students who took part in the research were thirty Grade Seven learners of a heterogeneous class at SMP Negeri 2 Limbangan Kendal, Central Java in total. Based on performance and writing ability, classroom students were grouped into the three proficiency levels including low, medium, and high achievers.

For the semi-structured interviews, eight students were chosen mainly to represent different proficiency levels and writing performances. This included three low-achieving students, three medium-achieving students, and two high-achieving students.

3. Instruments and Data Collection

In this research, three types of instruments were used:

a. Students' Writing Texts

The main source of data was the thirty students' written works of descriptive pieces entitled My Family. Activities required students to describe one or more family members by writing down relevant information such as name, occupation, age, hobby, and physical appearance. These texts were then analyzed for revealing patterns of meaning and spotting linguistic issues.

b. Classroom Observation

To observe teaching and learning activities, classroom observation was done during Genre-Based Pedagogy implementation. The observation tool consisted of recording pedagogical stages such as Building Knowledge of the Field, Modeling, Joint Construction, and Independent Construction. It also monitored how the teacher provided scaffolding to ideational, interpersonal, and textual meanings.

c. Semi-Structured Interviews

The semi-structured interviews were held with eight students through the uploaded interview protocol. Well-structured questions were ready to touch upon students' interpretation of descriptive writing, linguistic choices, challenges faced during writing, and the attitude towards Genre-Based Pedagogy.

4. Data Analysis Procedures

By using SFL theories, data analysis was carried out through qualitative content analysis.

a. Analysis of Ideational Meaning

Students' compositions were examined in the light of process types, participant structures, and nominal groups. More focus was given to the parts that highlight changes, actions performed by the subject, and noun phrases that describe things.

b. Analysis of Interpersonal Meaning

Interpersonal meaning analysis was mainly concerned with the evaluation resources and the emphasis was placed on the students' use of adjectival description that revealed their attitude and judgment towards family members.

c. Analysis of Textual Meaning

Textual analysis involved looking at the skeletical shape, thematic progression, cohesion, reference, and sentence organization.

5. Coding Framework

The central analytical framework of this work was an SFL-based coding adapted from Halliday and Matthiessen (2014), Genre-Based Pedagogy principles, and the uploaded SFL data coding framework to analyze students' descriptive writing, classroom observation, and interview data. Coding concentrated on ideational, interpersonal, and textual meanings.

Student written pieces were coded with a multi-level clausal, sentential, nominal group, paragraph, and whole-text. Confidentiality was safeguarded and analytic tracing was facilitated by giving each participant a student label, for example, S1, S2, S3, and so forth.

Different coding categories were used at different stages. Codes such as Identification (ID), Description of Appearance (DESC-APP), Description of Hobbies (DESC-HOB), Description of Character (DESC-CHAR), Description of Occupation (DESC-JOB), Closing Statement (CLOS) were used to analyze the genre structure. The ideational meaning analysis covered categories Relational

Process (REL-IS and REL-HAS), Material Process (MAT), Mental Process (MEN), Simple Nominal Group (NG-SIMPLE), and Expanded Nominal Group (NG-EXP).

Interpersonal meaning analysis involved appraisal categories such as Positive Appraisal (APP-POS), Judgment (JUD), Appreciation (APPREC), and Affection (AFF). Textual meaning analysis included thematic progression and cohesion categories such as Repeated Theme (THEME-REP), Pronoun Theme (THEME-PRON), Referential Cohesion (COH-REF), Logical Flow (FLOW-GOOD), and Weak Flow (FLOW-WEAK).

Error analysis categories included Grammar–To Be Error (GR-BE), Pronoun Error (GR-PRON), Tense Error (GR-TENSE), Organization Problem (TEXT-ORG), and Genre Shift (GEN-SHIFT).

For example:

"My mother is kind." (S1, APP-POS)

indicates that Student 1 used positive appraisal resources to construct interpersonal meaning.

Similarly:

"My father go to market every day." (S8, GEN-SHIFT)

indicates a shift in genre from descriptive writing to narrative construction.

Table 1 presents the summary of coding categories used in this study.

Table 1. Summary of SFL-Based Coding Categories

Code	Meaning	Example
REL-IS	Relational Process	"She is beautiful."
REL-HAS	Possessive Relational Process	"She has curly hair."
MAT	Material Process	"She cooks everyday."
MEN	Mental Process	"I love my family."
NG-EXP	Expanded Nominal Group	"long straight black hair"
APP-POS	Positive Appraisal	"My father is kind."
JUD	Judgment	"She is hardworking."
THEME-REP	Repeated Theme	"My mother… My mother…"
FLOW-WEAK	Weak Cohesion	Abrupt topic shifts
GR-BE	To Be Error	"My hobby singing."
GR-PRON	Pronoun Error	"Her hobby is fishing."
GEN-SHIFT	Genre Shift	Narrative instead of description

6. **Triangulation**

Triangulation was conducted by comparing findings from writing analysis, classroom observation, and interviews to ensure trustworthiness and credibility.

Results and Discussion

Result

1. Description of Meaning-Making Phenomena in Descriptive Writing

Studying the students' descriptive compositions unearthed a few consistent patterns in the manifestation of ideational, interpersonal, and textual meanings. Regarding ideational meaning, learners most commonly depicted family members through physical/material actions but often constructed relational clauses inaccurately. For interpersonal meaning, learners' language was mostly limited to the overuse of positive adjectives like good, kind, beautiful, etc., thus signifying a scarce range of appraisal resources. Focusing on textual meaning, a good number of learners failed to initiate the Identification step, showed poor Theme-Rheme progression and ended up listing attributes or features with hardly any cohesion. The above-mentioned patterns imply that the students could somehow associate descriptive writing with its communicative purpose but they still lacked skills in picking up suitable linguistic tools for competent meaning production.

Table 1. Summary of Meaning-Making Patterns in Students' Descriptive Writing

Metafunction	Dominant Pattern	Main Difficulty
Ideational	Frequent use of material processes	Inaccurate relational clauses
Interpersonal	Repetitive positive adjectives	Limited appraisal resources
Textual	Simple thematic progression	Weak cohesion and incomplete schematic structure

Source: Authors' analysis of students' descriptive writing using the Systemic Functional Linguistics framework (2026).

2. Ideational Meaning Findings

We analyzed the students' descriptive texts and found that they mainly conveyed ideational meanings using relational and material processes. The majority of students employed relational clauses to describe family members' characteristics, for example, age, job, physical features, and hobbies. Unfortunately, many students' texts had inaccurate relational structures, particularly with the use of linking verbs and possessive constructions. Furthermore, students almost always used material processes to describe everyday activities, which resulted in descriptions that resembled stories rather than descriptive texts.

The manuscript discrepancies were also marked. On the one hand, high-achieving students came up with more expanded nominal groups and detailed descriptions; on the other hand, low-achieving students mostly used simple noun phrases and few descriptive details. These results suggest that students were capable of writing about experiences; however, they had limited control over making use of descriptive language resources.

3. Interpersonal Meaning Findings

Additionally, the analysis pointed out that students were striving to convey positive interpersonal meanings when giving descriptions of family members. Most of the texts included evaluative language that showed love, respect, and gratitude. Frequently occurring adjectives such as kind, good, beautiful, and hardworking were at times found throughout the texts.

Students not only showed that they knew the social function of family members' presentations but the evaluative language repertoire was quite limited. Apart from that, only a handful of students used a rich and varied vocabulary to express their attitudes and judgments. Besides, interview information revealed that students wanted the readers to see their family members in a very positive light, which is a

sign of growing awareness of the audience and communicative purpose even if there are still linguistic limitations.

4. Textual Meaning Findings

Regarding the three meaning dimensions, textual meaning was the one that students found more difficult. Even though many descriptive texts were conceptually valid, they lacked schematic structure, thematic progression, and cohesion. Some students, for instance, skipped the Identification as they moved straightaway to giving descriptive details, which led to incomplete textual organization.

Besides that, a low Theme-Rheme progression was noticed as students often changed topics suddenly or reiterated the same theme without effectively developing the information. Also, issues with pronouns' referents and sentence connections detracted from the textual cohesion and coherence. All these patterns show that although the students could come up with relevant descriptive details on the topic, they had challenges in arranging their ideas into well-structured and linked texts.

Figure 1. Distribution of Major Meaning-Making Difficulties

Difficulty Area	Frequency
Relational Clause Errors	18
Limited Appraisal Vocabulary	16
Theme-Rheme Problems	21
Cohesion Problems	19
Genre Shift	11

Source: Authors' compilation based on students' writing analysis, classroom observations, and interview data (2026).

As illustrated in Figure 1, textual meaning was the major area of difficulty in comparison with ideational and interpersonal meaning. Theme-Rheme progression and cohesion problems represented the highest proportion of occurrences, which suggests that students had problems in systematically organizing the information in descriptive texts. Next in frequency were relational clause errors which also show teachers' challenge in generating descriptive meaning. In general, the figure is a clear demonstration that textual organization continues to be the greatest challenge in students' meaning-making development.

5. Factors Influencing Students' Meaning-Making Development

According to the data, student's meaning-making progression was most likely affected by linguistic, pedagogical, and situational aspects. A limited lexicon and inadequate knowledge of various English clause types seemed to put a cap on students' capacity to devise descriptions that are both precise and vivid. Besides that, errors relating to relational clauses and pronouns were elicited by the first-language interference. On top of that, lower achievers usually went for translation tactics coupled with asking peers for help upon facing vocabulary difficulties. The interview excerpts also illustrate those hindrances.

"I mix up 'is' and 'has' in describing family members because they look the same to me." (S4)

Another student said:

"I sometimes look at my friend's writing as I do not know too many English words." (S9)

Besides, real-time monitoring of the teaching-learning process indicated that the more students took part in the modeling and co-construction exercises, the more they appeared to be self-assured and in possession of skills when doing descriptive writing.

6. Implications of Meaning-Making Development in Genre-Based Pedagogy

The results show that the issues encountered by the students go beyond mere grammar and touch upon a variety of factors related to meaning. In the case of students, although the verbalization of family members was the key shared idea, jointly determining shared resources for elaboration, evaluation-oriented vocabularies, and discourse organizing vocabularies after writing fluently were the issues of concern. Concurrently, Genre-Based Pedagogy was the platform for students to be accompanied, motivated, and closely followed by the teacher thorough the modes of explicit modeling, collaborative writing, and scaffolding. One student was of the opinion:

"The sample text really guides me in how to go step by step when describing my mother." (S21)

This supports the idea that clear-cut instructions that associate different linguistic forms with their communicative functions can significantly accelerate students' development on all three meta functions in descriptive writing.

Table 2. Factors Influencing Students' Meaning-Making Development

Factor	Evidence from Data	Impact on Writing
Limited Vocabulary	Interview and observation	Restricted descriptions
L1 Transfer	Writing texts	Relational clause errors
Low Confidence	Interview responses	Peer dependency
Genre-Based Pedagogy	Observation data	Improved text awareness

Source**:** Authors' synthesis of writing analysis, classroom observations, and semi-structured interviews (2026).

Table 2 shows that several factors including linguistic features and teaching methods affected students' progression in meaning-making. Among those challenges, limited vocabulary was identified as the biggest hurdle which has prevented students from carrying out detailed descriptions or evaluations with the use of different kinds of linguistic resources. Students heavily depend on basic adjectives and simplified noun groups as evidence of this limitation. Besides that, errors in relational clauses and pronoun references resulting from the influence of first language have also been identified. Indonesian sentence patterns seem to have been transferred quite often by students into English writing.

Besides that, the discoveries also show that affective aspects influenced to a significant extent students' writing performance. According to interview data some of the students were not confident enough to write descriptive texts on their own, and thus, when they faced difficulties with vocabulary, they resorted either to their peers for help or to translation strategies. This type of reliance led to overuse of language and stunted idea generation. However, through classroom observations it was found that the Genre-Based Pedagogy served as an effective means of support via the provision of modelled, co-constructed, and explicit scaffolded work. The above-mentioned teaching strategies enabled students to identify descriptive text features, increase their vocabulary options, and become more conscious of how

language can be used to convey meanings related to ideation, interaction, and the text itself.

Discussion

1. Summary of Meaning-Making Development

Under examination, the students demonstrated the ability to infuse their texts with meanings from ideational, interpersonal, and textual domains, but their progress in all three sources of meanings was not equal. On the one hand, students were familiar with process-based expressions but were not comfortable with descriptive relational structures. On the other hand, they relied heavily on a small set of positive adjectives and felt difficulty in keeping cohesion and thematic progression throughout their writing. However, through classroom visits and student interactions, it was evidenced that Genre-Based Pedagogy gave great support through the employment of techniques such as modeling, joint construction, and explicit language instruction. Hence, the students took their first steps to understanding a writing as a tool for meaning-making, even though their linguistic resources for producing a fully coherent descriptive text were insufficient.

2. Reflecting on the Causes of Students' Meaning-Making Difficulties

The root causes of the issues found in this study are attributed to a number of factors. The vocabulary problem had an impact on strategies as elaboration and evaluation became more explicit. At the same time, L1 influence led to certain cases of English relational clause and reference marker constructions. In addition, differences in language proficiency levels accounted for the fact that learners who were at the lowest levels of achievement tended to rely heavily on their peers and translation strategies. Even though Genre-Based Pedagogy had given them a large amount of attention and support, students still needed longer exposures to the language patterns that were introduced in class conduct. This implies that the development of meaning-making depends on the interaction of learner's individual traits and the provision of academic support.

3. Interpreting Meaning-Making Development through Systemic Functional Linguistics

Interpretation of the research results from a Systemic Functional Linguistics point of view unveils that students do not have an equal mastery of ideational, interpersonal and textual resources yet. The dominating use of material processes shows that students prefer to present their real-life events as actions rather than qualities, which are mainly responsible for describing characteristically the person, event or situation, in the texts. Likewise, with the little use of evaluative resources students hardly got their attitudes and feelings across. Textual weaknesses in thematic progression and cohesion were a real cause of concern. All these supports the argument that the letter "W" in the acronym "IEWS" that stands for viewing development as the extent of mastery of linguistic resources for meaning-making should be taken seriously.

4. Positioning the Findings within Previous Research

The results are in line with those of previous researches that have also found that EFL students have problems with the organization of genres, vocabulary use and cohesion in descriptive writing. Indonesian EFL learners have also been identified

previously as weak in thematic progression and limited in descriptive vocabulary. Furthermore, this study corroborated earlier findings that Genre-Based Pedagogy leads to writing development through explicit scaffolding and collaborative learning. Unlike earlier studies most of which focused primarily on writing products or achievement outcomes, this study looked at the students' meaning-making development across ideational, interpersonal, and textual dimensions. This process-oriented perspective, therefore, adds to a more complete understanding of the way students develop their linguistic resources under the guidance of writing instruction.

Table 3. Comparison Between Previous Studies and Current Study

Study	Main Focus	Findings	Contribution of Current Study
Noprianto (2017)	Descriptive text analysis	Genre difficulties	Examines meaning-making process
Rodliyah & Liani (2022)	Cohesion analysis	Theme-Rheme problems	Includes ideational, interpersonal, and textual meanings
Current Study	Meaning-making development	Uneven metafunction development	Combines SFL and Genre-Based Pedagogy

Source: Adapted from Noprianto (2017), Rodliyah and Liani (2022), and the authors' research findings (2026).

5. Pedagogical Actions and Future Research Directions

The results suggest a number of challenges for teaching and doing research in the future. Firstly, and most importantly, it is necessary that teachers explain thoroughly relational clauses, appraisal resources, thematic progression and cohesive devices. Besides, they are expected to increase the number of collaborative writing and guided practice opportunities. In addition, writing instruction should be supported by schools where making meaning and grammatical accuracy are intertwined. Future studies could be carried out by means of analyzing the development of meaning-making over different genres, different levels of education and various learning contexts. Longitudinal studies with large samples of students may be able to identify students' gradual acquisition of ideational, interpersonal, and textual resources in relation to Genre-Based Pedagogy and SFL-informed instruction.

Conclusion

This research aimed to find out the ways in which seventh graders came up with descriptive writing ideas, ie. ideational meaning, kept the readers interested and conveyed their writer's personality, ie. interpersonal meaning, and used language at the level of the whole text, ie. textual meaning, by employing a Genre-Based Pedagogy (GBP). The results showed that, through Genre-Based Pedagogy (GBP), the students were able to successfully develop meaning-making resources across the three metafunctions, but the growth was not consistent. In the creation of ideational meaning, students quite often used material processes and were not very good at producing correct relational clauses. Moving on to interpersonal meaning, here the students most frequently used the same kind of evaluative adjectives over and over again, which suggests that their appraisal resources are quite limited. As for textual meaning, students had several problems in the ways they organized their texts through correct schematic structures, thematic progression, and cohesive devices. On the other hand, Genre-Based Pedagogy seemed to

be a fruitful approach in enhancing students' writing skills through the use of modeling, joint construction, and explicit scaffolding, which in turn helped them to understand descriptive text structures and language patterns better.

The present research makes a threefold contribution: conceptual, methodological, and pedagogical to the field of EFL writing instruction. Conceptually, it adds new dimensions to our knowledge of writing development as a meaning-making process by taking into consideration ideational, interpersonal, and textual meanings at the same time. Methodologically, through the incorporation of students' writing products, classroom observations, and interviews, it offers a comprehensive depiction of learners' meaning-making development. Pedagogically, the research points out the crucial role played by the combination of Systemic Functional Linguistics and Genre-Based Pedagogy to enhance students' consciousness of the fact that language choice can be a means of constructing meanings in descriptive writing. Further, the study points to the significance of explicit scaffolding in making the connection between language forms and communicative purposes more transparent for learners.

Major limitations that hint at future research directions should be stated. Firstly, this study was carried out in one classroom at a single junior high school, so the generalizability of the results to other settings may be limited. Secondly, the study focused only on one single writing type descriptive writing, and hence, other genres remain untapped. Thirdly, since the research was conducted on the basis of relatively short student texts, it was not possible to do a deep analysis of complex linguistic patterns. Therefore, it is highly advisable that future studies seek to involve larger and more diverse groups of subjects, explore different genres as well as different educational levels, and make use of longitudinal research methods focused on tracking the change of student meaning-making development over time. All these aspects, when taken together, will contribute significantly to the further development and facilitation of the application of Systemic Functional Linguistics and Genre-Based Pedagogy in EFL writing classrooms.

Author Contribution Statement

The authors' contributions to this article are as follows: Agustina Putri Pramudyartanti acted as the initiator and principal conceptor of the study and was responsible for the research design, data analysis, and manuscript preparation. Rahmawati Aisyah contributed to the analysis and interpretation of the data. Sitti Nurmagfirah participated in data management, data collecting and manuscript. Widhiyanto served as the supervisor and validator of the data, analysis procedures, and research findings. Galuh Kirana Dwi Areni contributed to proofreading, editorial revision and critical revision of the manuscript. All authors approved the final content of the article and are responsible for all aspects of this research.

Statement of Interest

All authors declare that they have no financial or non-financial conflicts of interest relevant to this research.

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