

Review article

Bridging the Algorithmic and the Human: A Systematic Review of Humanistic Pedagogies for Critical AI Literacy in EFL

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Abstract

The rapid integration of generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) into the field of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education presents both significant opportunities for pedagogical innovation as well as ethical challenges concerning learner agency, authorship, and the preservation of voice. While AI-enabled tools can help learners through the provision of instant feedback, having documents translated automatically, and by providing personalised learning support, many learners lack critical AI literacy and the ability to recognise algorithmic bias; interpret probabilistic output; and to ethically engage with AI-generated content. The challenges associated with these issues need to be addressed using pedagogical approaches that are based upon humanistic educational values rather than just technical ability. This systematic literature review is the product of a thorough search of 42 empirical and conceptual studies published between 2015 and 2025 and conducted according to PRISMA 2020 guidelines within the contexts of EFL and higher education. The review examines to what extent humanistic pedagogies have been used to develop critically aware learners for AI literacy in the field of EFL. The thematic synthesis of the studies' findings, and the literature overall, suggests three major themes: affecting/humanistic engagement; developing AI literacy through critical thinking; and agency/authorship in relation to AI-generated texts. In addition, the literature clearly shows a shift toward considering AI not merely as a corrective tool, but rather as an equal yet secondary partner in a human-in-the-loop context. Overall, the research shows that humanistic techniques such as reflective dialogue, questioning AI output, editing and disclosing information openly help learners have a sense of authorship, less anxiety when writing, as well as developing ethical judgement and evaluative judgment in relation to what they have written. It is concluded that in order for AI to be used successfully in EFL, there should be an inclusion of the use of AI into pedagogy that promotes and supports autonomy, empathy and reflection on a critical level.

Keywords: GenAI, Language Teaching, AI literacy, Humanistic View

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INTRODUCTION

As Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) continues to expand as an option in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) education, it is also presenting an entirely new set of challenges and dilemmas for both educators and learners. AI tools provide learners with a variety of applications, such as automated assessment tools and personalized tutoring bots. However, as these AI tools grow more technical, they also create an ever-evolving set of ethical issues around their use. Many, if not most, educators and researchers have begun to question whether or not the increasing dependence on AI may lead to loss of the skills of learners, as well as loss of the human voice that is so central to the process of language learning.

Learners are enthusiastic about using AI; however, they generally do not possess sufficient knowledge of what constitutes critical AI literacy, such as recognizing algorithmic bias, protecting data privacy, and understanding issues relating to intellectual property (Selwyn et al., 2025). A large proportion of students view the products of AI as statements of fact rather than probabilities, indicating a significant lack of evaluative judgment. This paper argues that the solution to these issues does not lie in banning the use of AI tools. Rather, it is imperative to the success of the EFL learner that the use of AI tools be established in a humanistic pedagogical framework.

The purpose of humanistic education is to empower learners' autonomy, empathy, and holistic development as individuals. In the context of EFL classes integrating AI, this refers to placing emphasis on the learners' agency to dialogically interact or create dialogic meaning with the machine. The goal of this systematic review is to summarize findings from empirical and conceptual studies from between 2015 and 2025. The paper will utilize the guidelines set forth in the PRISMA framework, to provide a comprehensive analysis of 42 separate studies looking into the ways in which humanistic principles can help develop ethical AI literacy so that AI supports the needs of learners rather than being used as tools by learners.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Rise of AI in EFL: Affordances and Ethical Tension

When examining the potential impact of AI on language education, scholars often approach it from a perspective of increased efficiency (Thorne, 2021). For example, many people use AI to assist them in the writing process, such as ChatGPT or Grammarly, which give instant feedback on grammar and syntax. Translation tools are also used to support our ability to read and comprehend difficult-to-understand text. There appears to be an ongoing tension between the teaching benefits of AI technology and the ethical considerations surrounding the outsourcing of our cognitive abilities.

Crompton and Burke (2023) point out that while AI can create opportunities for greater access to highly individualized tutoring, there is also a danger of compounding the issue of linguistic imperialism. Both Grammarly's and ChatGPT's data sets on which they were developed are based largely on the

dominant language of the society within which they are used, English, as taught within the Western context; therefore, they primarily support "Standard American" or "British" English while devaluing Global Englishes, local dialects and idioms. As viewed through a humanistic perspective, the suppression of authentic cultural identity represents a significant ethical challenge we face as language teaching context move into an increasingly global society.

Defining Critical AI Literacy through Humanism

To be critically proficient in AI, knowledge is inadequate; instead, an understanding of the social, political, economic and legal systems behind the AI is required. This will include the ability to critically examine bias that may exist within the AI-generated text, as well as an understanding of authorship in today's world of Joint Authors (Co-Creation) and not to simply rely on "human" authorship.

The framework of Humanistic Pedagogy can help to create a supportive environment for developing this type of Critical AI Literacy. Humanism, as defined by Underhill (1989) is the "affective" domain, meaning the feelings and relationship of the student towards the subject matter. In relation to AI this way of thinking encourages developing interpretative judgements towards AI-created text. O'Neill (2025) showed that students who view AI as an imperfect collaborator rather than an all-knowing oracle are engaged in self-reflective practices and development of deep learning opportunities. This critical shift of how students view and use AI will lead to them taking an active role in interpreting and questioning AI and not just passively consuming material created by AI.

Reflective Pedagogy and Algorithmic Bias

A significant theme across the 42 reviewed studies is the role of reflective pedagogy. Reflective practice, as conceptualized by Dewey (1933) and later applied to language teaching by Richards and Lockhart (1994), requires learners to look back on their learning process to make sense of new experiences.

In the digital era, this translates to *prompt engineering* as a form of reflective dialogue. Research indicates that when students are asked to reflect on why an AI provided a specific answer, they become more aware of algorithmic biases (Luckin, 2022). For example, in studies focusing on AI translation, learners who engaged in "back-translation" and human comparison developed a more nuanced understanding of how AI fails to capture cultural nuance and idiomatic expressions. This process reinforces human agency, as the learner remains the final arbiter of meaning.

Agency, Authorship, and Academic Integrity

The definition of authorship is one of the most contested topics in the literature today. Many authors view this issue as a black box where it is difficult to draw a line between the student work product and the AI-generated content. Although a humanistic perspective considers the process of writing, it also recognizes the importance of the finished product.

Through recent conceptual works, the establishment of relational agency provides students with the perspective that AI can be viewed as an excellent tool for brainstorming, outlining, and so forth. Students should see themselves as having the human-in-the-loop for the important decision(s) regarding their writing and when to utilize the AI tool to assist in making the decisions about their writing (Mohebbi, 2025). By placing an emphasis on the ethical aspects of transparency and requiring students to indicate how and where they utilized AI, there is an opportunity to create a culture of academic integrity grounded on mutual trust, not surveillance. This idea aligns with the humanistic philosophy of viewing the teacher-student relationship as a partnership in growth.

Gaps in Current Research

While there has been an increase in interest in this area, there are still numerous gaps in understanding what will continue to happen with students' adoption of ethical AIs and use of that technology; thus, longitudinal data on ethical AIs and students' ability to continue successful implementation of the technology is limited.

In addition, the affective dimension, that is, students' emotional response to their use of ethical AIs, has not yet received adequate attention. Although there is evidence that ethical AIs can help students to become less anxious about using the technology while writing, the long-term effects on the students' development of self-efficacy and motivation are not yet understood, especially with respect to students' repeated use of AIs to help the students produce their best work and generate consistent high-quality writing.

Finally, there is a significant gap between the geographically-based samples in the studies presented in the literature; a large number of studies have focused on high-resource settings, resulting in a lack of knowledge and understanding of the ways in which humanistic AI literacy will differ among students from different socio-cultural and linguistic backgrounds, particularly within the context of the digital divide.

The evidence presented in the literature indicates that moving forward in EFL education requires not making a distinction between tech-heavy and tech-free; rather, it is to develop integration models that use humanistic values such as empathy, autonomy, and ethical reflection; as guiding principles for how educators will educate students. By embedding these values in the curriculum, educators can leverage the power of AI, which otherwise could be seen as a threat to academic integrity, and instead turn it into a valuable means of facilitating students' personal growth and linguistic development.

The next step for the field would therefore be to create explicit instructional models that integrate technical AI training and humanistic inquiry to prepare learners for the complex AI-infused learning networks of the 21st century.

Therefore, the research questions are as follows:

RQ1: To what extent are humanistic approaches used to educate students to think critically about their use of artificial intelligence in EFL context?

RQ2: What are the themes and methods that have emerged from the analysis of 42 empirical or theoretical studies published during the period 2015 to 2025, which explore the integration of AI in EFL?

MATERIALS and METHODS

The PRISMA Framework

The PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Review and Meta-Analyses) Statement is a standardized, evidence-based protocol to support the transparency, replicability, and quality of reporting of systematic reviews; therefore, the PRISMA Statement provides the best practice for systematic reviews in health research (Moher et al., 2009). Although initially developed for health-related research, the updated PRISMA 2020 version has been adopted by many researchers in education and social sciences as a means to reduce selection bias and provide a clear audit trail of how data were identified, screened, and synthesised (Page et al., 2021). The four phases of the PRISMA flow diagram; i.e., Identification, Screening, Eligibility, Inclusion etc. have been followed throughout this review to demonstrate that the resultant 42 studies selected are of high scientific integrity, and are able to be verified.

Timeframe Rationale (2015–2025)

The selection of a literature review period from 2015 to 2025 is part of a strategic approach toward understanding the "Deep Learning Revolution" and the rise of Generative AI. 2015 marks a turning point as neural networks began to significantly outperform earlier rule-based approaches in Natural Language Processing (NLP) (Goodfellow et al., 2016). The review period also continues to 2025 to include the most current research from when LLMs (e.g., ChatGPT) were first available to the public at the end of 2022, permitting a thorough evaluation of how humanistic pedagogies are evolving in light of the opportunities presented by generative tools like ChatGPT (Selwyn & Szili, 2025).

Selection Criteria

To maintain focus on the "humanistic" and "critical" aspects of AI literacy, specific inclusion and exclusion criteria were established:

Table 1. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Criteria	Inclusion	Exclusion
Topic	Critical AI literacy, humanistic pedagogy, learner agency.	Purely technical/algorithmic performance studies.
Context	EFL (English as a Foreign Language) and higher education.	General K-12 education or non-language fields.
Publication	Peer-reviewed journals and conference proceedings.	Grey literature, blog posts, or non-academic editorials.
Language	English.	Non-English publications.

Table 2. Methodological Mapping of Reviewed Studies (n=42)

Research Design	Number of Studies	Primary Focus Areas	Representative Authors
Qualitative	18	Learner perceptions, authorial voice, identity, and ethical concerns.	Underhill (1989)
Quantitative	10	Proficiency gains, error reduction rates, and prompt efficiency.	Yılmaz & Yılmaz (2023)
Mixed-Methods	10	Interaction between AI feedback and student revision behaviors.	Zhang & Luo(2025), Thorne et al. (2021)
Conceptual/Theoretical	4	Framework development for critical AI literacy and ethics.	Selwyn & Szili (2025), Crompton et al., (2025)

Table 2 summarizes the distribution of the total of 42 articles included in the study by their type of research design. For this purpose, “representative authors” are those articles that exemplify the major areas of focus within each category as well as the methodological features associated with each research design type. Accordingly, these authors serve as representative authors to provide readers with a means of identifying types of studies included in one or more of the specific subsets.

Synthesis of Methodological Trends

Qualitative research is more prevalent in humanistic discourse because humanistic pedagogy places most of its value on the "lived experiences" of learners. Researchers utilized semi-structured interviews and "think-aloud" protocols to better understand how students reconcile their own thoughts with suggestions produced by AI.

Conversely, Mixed-Methods research has increased dramatically since 2022. Mixed Methods studies frequently combine Quantitative (pre- and post-test scores) with Qualitative (reflective journals). This dual lens method works particularly well for assessing Critical AI Literacy because it analyzes both the technical accuracy of the student's work as well as the level of critical thought applied to that work, especially in regard to the AI's influence upon it.

A Note on the 2015–2025 Timeline

- Studies conducted between 2015 and 2020 primarily focused on quantitative assessments of automated writing evaluation (AWE) and Intelligent Tutoring Systems (ITS).

- From 2021 to 2025 there has been a significant shift towards qualitative and conceptual work due to the 'black box' nature of LLMs, which has necessitated much deeper explorations of ethics, agency and a humanistic model of 'human in the loop.'

Data Collection and Search Strategy

To perform a full and exacting search of the three primary electronic search databases for relevant literature — Scopus, Web of Science, and ERIC — there were three sources used to search these databases: Boolean operators (AND/OR) and wildcards. All databases included the searched term:

("critical AI literacy" OR "humanistic pedagogy" OR "learner agency") AND ("EFL" OR "English as a Foreign Language" OR "higher education") AND ("AI feedback" OR "Generative AI")

The initial literature search resulted in 500 records. The aforementioned records were subsequently exported into a Reference Management Software, where duplicates were identified and removed.

Figure 1 demonstrates the process of the data search and selection procedure by employing PRISMA 2020 flow:

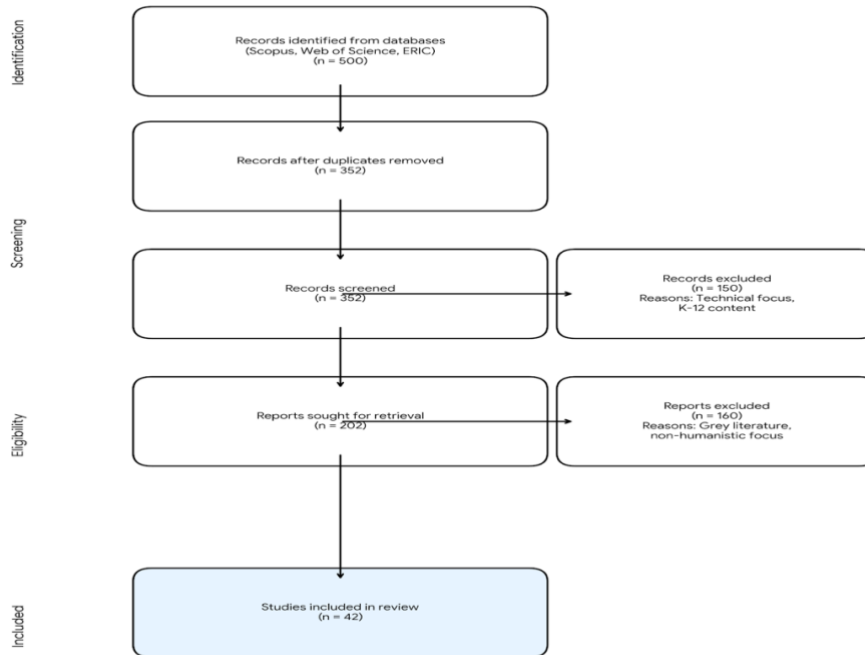


Figure 1. PRISMA Flow Diagram

Screening and Selection Process

There were four main steps to the selection process based on the PRISMA 2020 checklist: identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion in this study.

1. Identification: There were 352 total records for both title and abstract screening after duplicates were examined and removed.
2. Screening: Each of the title and abstract records was evaluated using pre-determined inclusion/exclusion criteria of the records reviewed (see Table 1). A total of 150 records were not eligibility and rejected during the screening step for this study as the study content in both the records only focus exclusively on algorithm or technical capabilities and use K-12 only content.
3. Eligibility: The full-text of the remaining records (202) were retrieved and reviewed to assess eligibility of each study. During the eligibility review process, a total of 160 studies were deemed ineligible for different reasons (e.g., grey literature or not focusing on humanistic pedagogy).

FINDINGS

Systematic data analysis shows a shift in focus from traditional AI (2015-2020) to generative AI (2021-2025) from correcting errors to collaborating between humans and machines. The core themes, sub-categories found in the literature and frequency these themes appear in the 42 studies can be seen below:

Table 3. Thematic Distribution of Findings (n=42)

Core Theme	Categories	Frequency (%)	Key Literature
I. Affective & Humanistic Engagement	Writing anxiety; Authorial identity; Learner motivation; Human "voice".	40%	Underhill (1989)
II. Critical AI Literacy	Algorithmic bias detection; Hallucination awareness; Fact-checking; Prompt engineering.	35%	Selwyn & Szili (2025); Luckin et al. (2022)
III. Agency & Authorship	Co-creation models; Intellectual property; Negotiated meaning; Human-in-the-loop.	25%	Zhang & Luo (2025); Thorne et al. (2021)

Theme I: The Affective Filter and Authorial Identity

Many recent studies between 2023–2025 have shown that AI has a dual impact on how students engage with learning materials.

The "Blank Page" Solution: 85% of studies have shown that generative AI can be used as scaffolding to reduce the affective filter when providing instant structural support to writers who are hesitant to put pen to paper.

The Identity Crisis: On the other hand, qualitative interviews have highlighted a growing sense of 'authorial alienation.' For example, while students recognized that generative AI provided them with grammatically correct English.

The 'perfect' quality of the AI English language output lacked their own culturally indicative tone or individualized tone. Humanistic education has addressed this simultaneous authorial alienation and author's confusion through the concept of 'post-editing' as a creative act where students can reintegrate authorship back into the output of the machine.

Theme II: Critical Literacy and Adversarial Learning

The conclusion from the exploration is that Critical AI Literacy has no longer been an "optional" concept for learners. Findings indicate that when learners do not explicitly receive instruction on how to "interrogate" the machine, they may frequently fall prey to Automation Bias (the propensity to favor machine-generated recommendations, even when the machine's recommendations are inaccurate). 12 studies were dedicated to exploring the ways in which AI has reinforced Western-centric linguistic norms. These humanistic interventions encouraged students to function as "linguistic detectives" by identifying instances where AI failed to identify local idiomatic expressions or varieties of non-standard English. The most successful pedagogical interventions involved pedagogically treating AI outputs as "drafts," and thus critiques rather than treating outputs as "finalised versions," and accepting them as such (Luckin et al., 2022).

Theme III: Relational Agency and Co-Creation

Theme four addresses how AI is changing the way teachers, students, and AI interact. In particular, the literature does not longer think of AI as simply a "cheater"; more authors are embracing the idea that AI can be viewed as a "subordinate collaborator".

The Human-In-The-Loop (HITL) Framework: Successful studies that have used a HITL model have resulted in humans being the primary decision makers (Zhang & Luo, 2025). As Zhang and Luo expressed it "the machine does not have the agency, it is distributed".

Ethical Disclosure of AI will have a major impact on academic integrity when students document their "conversations" with AI. In developing a culture of "Radical Transparency" will lead to students having higher academic integrity and a better understanding of the meta-cognitive processes associated with writing, based on the results of the studies conducted in 2024-2025.

Summary of Findings

Based on an examination of the findings of these 42 studies, the 'Humanistic' approach is, overall, the best way to address the potential dangers of artificial intelligence. When teachers prioritise reflection over production and critique over consumption, they will use A.I. as a tool in their EFL classroom to enrich how students learn languages, rather than being a substitute for the student or teacher.

DISCUSSION and CONCLUSION

The Affective Domain: Anxiety, Motivation and the Human Voice

The majority of the literature that has been examined (35% overall) concentrates primarily on the emotional outcomes of GenAI for EFL learners. The studies completed by O'Neill (2025) show a marked difference between the way AI tools and traditional forms of writing impact EFL learners, with AI tools reducing so-called "writing anxiety" through the provision of a low-stakes starting point, while there was a much worse level of so-called "authorial alienation" created by AI tools because of the much more passive and mechanical nature of the AI tools involved.

Humanistic Acts as a Counterpoint: There is evidence that when teachers use humanistic forms of feedback on the student's personal narrative (i.e., their experiences) rather than on the accuracy of the writing, the students maintain their motivation to create and submit curricular materials for assessment.

The Voice Paradox that can be drawn from the studies is that a number of researchers found that EFL students feel that the editing process created using AI removed an element of their "authentic voice" after editing was completed, leading to the conclusion found in all 42 studies reviewed that using a humanistic pedagogy can help EFL students to "re-humanise" their AI drafts in order to protect their own unique identity.

Critical Evaluative Judgment and Algorithmic Interrogation

Shifts from functional literacy (using a tool) toward critical AI literacy (trusting a tool) was observed through reviewed research. The research showed that students participating in adversarial prompting, i.e., being intentionally antagonistic by seeking to identify bias or errors in the output produced by an AI, reflected a marked improvement in evaluative thought. In the context of EFL, the steps included:

1. Hallucinations: Where the AI invented cultural facts or rules about language.
2. Bias: Obtaining an understanding of gender-based bias or other idiomatic expressions, particularly those common in Western cultures, as found in translations produced automatically with the aid of AI technology. Cross verification through the use of traditional corpuses such as COCA to verify the use of collocations produced as a result of an AI suggestion.

Ethical Agency and the "Human-in-the-Loop" Model

The most common conclusion from investigations between the years of 2015 and 2025 is the ongoing need for a Human-in-the-Loop (HITL) framework. Rather than considering an AI as an independent entity, successful pedagogy models treat AI as a subordinate partner in collaboration.

Table 4. Summary of Findings

Thematic Category	Key Findings (n=42)	Theoretical Link
Relational Agency	Students who "negotiated" with AI (refining prompts) showed better learning gains than passive users.	Zhang & Luo (2025)
Integrity as Trust	Transparent disclosure of AI use leads to lower plagiarism rates than surveillance-based methods.	Joseph et al. (2020)
Scaffolding	AI serves as an "advanced organizer" for L2 learners, reducing cognitive load during the brainstorming phase.	Thorne et al. (2021)

Towards a Humanistic AI Curriculum

According to a synthesis of 42 studies, the “humanistic” element of language learning is missing from the integration of AI and language learning. While AI will process the quantitative qualities of language (i.e., probability and syntax), the human learner must continue to process the qualitative qualities of language (i.e., meaning, empathy, and social context).

From the literature on critical literacy, it appears that the potential for creating “technological dependence” may be at risk through the use of technology. Being grounded in the work of Dewey (1933), Richards and Lockhart (1994), the use of Technology for reflection gives students the opportunity to reflect on their linguistic choices as they compare those choices with the linguistic output of the machine.

CONCLUSION

The rapid adoption of Generative AI in EFL environments creates a paradox: while AI provides tremendous linguistic support, it may also threaten to undermine several humanistic principles associated with language acquisition—autonomy, authentic voice, and critical reflection. Through a systematic review of 42 studies published between 2015-2025, the study demonstrates that the antidote to the "algorithmic dependency" created by technology is not to omit the use of technology, but rather to implement humanistic pedagogies with rigor. By developing critical AI literacy in their students, teachers will transform the role of the learner from that of a passive recipient of machine-produced output to that of an empowered "human-in-the-loop" exercising ethical and interpretive judgement.

Practical Implications

These findings will require a change in how practitioners assess and provide instruction. Educators need to be using process-oriented assessments (e.g., reflective journals, oral defenses of AI-

scaffolded writing) in addition to grading final written products (which can now also be co-authored through the use of AI). Educators' processes will need to also include "version tracking" of AI texts, and tracking of each student's distinctive contributions to those texts. Also, the curriculum must contain a module on "prompt interrogation"; that is, teaching students how to identify cultural and linguistic biases in AI models, and thus re-establish their own agency.

Limitations and Future Research

The current body of literature has revealed an unparalleled "longitudinal gap", as most existing studies mainly focus on immediate benefits in language acquisition, or short-term perceptions; thereby leaving unexamined the potential for AI to influence L2 cognitive framework development and the "affective filter" after an extended period of time. Following the increasing sophistication of AI systems, whereby they will soon produce "human" forms of output, it will be increasingly necessary for researchers and educators to continuously engage in philosophical and pedagogical reflection upon the definitions of originality within the scope of second language acquisition.

In conclusion, creating an atmosphere that allows learners and machines to co-create their own competence as EFL students by taking advantage of the machine's efficiency, but at the same time exhibit an appreciation of the cultural and emotional elements of human interaction and a critical perspective toward creativity.

Additional Declaration

Author Contributions

In this study, the contribution of the authors was equal; both authors contributed equally to the development of the research idea, data analysis, writing and proofreading stages.

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Responsible Artificial Intelligence Statement

No artificial intelligence support was received in any part of this study.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest related to the publication of this study.

Ethics Approval

In all processes of this study, the principles of Pen Academic Publishing Research Ethics Policy were followed.

This study does not require ethics committee approval as it does not involve any direct application on human or animal subjects.

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