



A Comparative Study on the Use of “But” by Chinese EFL learners and Native Speakers: A Rhetorical Structure Theory Approach

Shiyu Xia

Beijing Foreign Studies University, Haidian District 100080, China

1160689138@qq.com

Abstract. Conjunctions have long been recognized as effective devices to achieve coherence in English discourse. Among all kind of conjunctions, “but” is used frequently by both native speakers and Chinese EFL learners. However, most previous studies focus on a wide range of conjunctions rather than this specific one, leaving the diverse uses of “but” underexplored. To fill this gap, the current study comprehensively investigates the use of “but” by Chinese EFL learners and native speakers under the guidance of Rhetorical Structure Theory—a framework proposing over 30 rhetorical relations with clear definitions, highly suitable for analyzing relations between adjacent units connected by “but”. The research mainly investigates the features of rhetorical relations manifested through “but” in spoken discourse by native English speakers and Chinese EFL learners respectively, the similarities and differences between the two groups, and the causes of the differences. Based on data from three comparable corpora (BASE, MICASE, SECCL), the study finds four main rhetorical relations frequently used by both groups: Concession, Contrast, Conjunction, and Joint. However, Chi-square tests identify significant differences: Chinese EFL learners tend to overuse Concession and Sequence, while underusing Antithesis, Conjunction and Joint. These discrepancies are attributed to L1 transfer, where the typological and pragmatic differences between L1 and L2 impede Chinese EFL learners’ cognitive processing of L2. The findings provide empirical implications for teaching the idiomatic use of conjunctions, reveal the deficiencies of RST in analyzing spoken discourse, and offer insights for improving Chinese EFL learners’ discourse competence.

Keywords: Chinese EFL learners, But (Conjunction), Spoken discourse, Rhetorical Structure Theory.

1 Introduction

Conjunctions are pivotal cohesive devices for discourse coherence^[6], and “but” is one of the most frequently used conjunctions by both Chinese EFL learners and native speakers. Nonetheless, as Liu^[16] pointed out, “the use of ‘but’ by L2 speakers is understudied in the literature” (p.483). Most previous studies have focused on the whole set

of conjunctions instead of a single one^{[3][29]}, thus lacking in-depth analysis for its functions and specific use in different contexts.

In order to fill this gap, the current study aims to explore the diverse uses of the conjunction “but” by Chinese EFL learners and native English speakers in a comprehensive manner. Rhetorical Structure Theory, proposed by Mann and Thompson^[19], is adopted as the theoretical framework given the wide range of rhetorical relations involved. By comparing the use of “but” between Chinese EFL learners and native speakers, the study may shed light on English conjunction teaching and learning, helping Chinese EFL learners improve their competence in the idiomatic use of “but”.

2 Literature Review

2.1 The Conjunction “But” in English Discourse

In L2 acquisition, most previous research^{[2][17]} has studied the use of different types of conjunctions under the taxonomy by Halliday and Hasan^[6] or Quirk et al.^[23]. It has been found that “but” is one of the most commonly used conjunctions in spoken and written discourse by both native speakers and EFL learners^{[1][29]}. However, many Chinese EFL learners tend to overuse or misuse this conjunction^[33].

While this problem has been pointed out by previous studies, a large number of them have merely touched upon the conjunction “but” by calculating the frequency of its use^{[3][17][29]}. There is a lack of systematic and in-depth research into this conjunction. In order to fill this gap, the current study offers a comprehensive view on different functions of “but” depending on contexts. As Yeung^[32] put it, “the spotlight should not be shed into connectives as a whole, rather, individual connectives should be investigated to identify their various patterns of functions and meanings” (p.331). It has been shown in previous research that the conjunction “but” can connect adjacent clauses through multiple logical-semantic relations^{[11][34]}.

Therefore, this study specifically focuses on a single conjunction “but” and its various rhetorical relations. Based on this thorough view on the functions of “but”, a more detailed analysis on the reasons for its misuse and overuse among Chinese EFL learners is achieved.

2.2 Rhetorical Structure Theory

Rhetorical Structure Theory (RST) was first proposed by Mann and Thompson (1988), which addresses text organization by means of relations that hold between parts of a text. The core of this theory is a set of rhetorical relations^[10], which serve as the foundation for this study.

RST segments texts into minimal semantic units (clauses or simple sentences) categorized as Nuclei (core information) and Satellites (supplementary information), with rhetorical relations divided into nucleus-satellite and multinuclear types. Based on the effect achieved on the reader, nucleus-satellite relations can be further divided into presentational and subject matter relations. The former intends to increase some inclination in the reader, such as the desire to act or the degree of positive regard for, belief

in, or acceptance of the Nucleus, while the latter aims to let the reader recognize the relation in question. A comprehensive taxonomy of rhetorical relations is presented in **Table 1**, each with a clear definition in terms of four dimensions: 1) Constraints on the Nucleus (CoN); 2) Constraints on the Satellite (CoS); 3) Constraints on the combination of Nucleus and Satellite (CoNS); 4) Effect (achieved on the text receiver) (Tef).

Table 1. A Taxonomy of Rhetorical Relations.

Type	Rhetorical Relations	
Nucleus-satellite	Presentation- Relations	Antithesis, Background, Concession, Enablement, Evidence, Justify, Motivation, Preparation, Restatement, Summary
	Subject Matter Relations	Circumstance, Condition, Elaboration, Evaluation, Interpretation, Means, Non-volitional cause, Non-volitional result, Otherwise, Purpose, Solutionhood, Unconditional, Unless, Volitional cause, Volitional result
Multinuclear		Conjunction, Contrast, Disjunction, Joint, List, Multinuclear restatement, Sequence

2.3 Rationale for Using RST to Analyze Conjunctions

RST points to a close relation between relations and coherence in texts, thus constituting a way of explaining coherence^[28]. It posits that conjunctions are a type of surface-level indicators of deeper rhetorical relations, which are also called cue phrases in the framework of RST. They can be intuitively used as a sufficiently accurate indicator of discourse segmentation and rhetorical relation determination^[10].

Under the guidance of RST, a more comprehensive view on conjunctions can be obtained. While conjunctions are simply seen as grammatical cohesive devices from traditional perspectives, RST helps infer implicit rhetorical relations expressed by explicit conjunctions, which is critical in analyzing discourse where the logic underlying the use of conjunctions is nuanced or ambiguous. As Halliday and Hasan^[7] pointed out, cohesion is a semantic relation, but it must be complemented by the register—the contextual configuration of the text, and the internal cohesion of a text is thus constrained and determined by the situational context. It corresponds with the focus of RST on how the communicative intentions are realized. As Taboada and Mann^[28] put it, “It is worth exploring how RST interacts with cohesive devices in the language” (p.449).

Thus, in response to the need for a more functional analysis that can make up for the under-exploration of “but” and further explain why misuse and overuse of this conjunction occur among Chinese EFL learners, the current study adopts RST as a theoretical framework, combining a corpus-based quantitative and qualitative analysis to fill this gap. This research sets out to answer the following questions:

- 1) What are the rhetorical relations manifested through the use of “but” in spoken discourse by native English speakers and Chinese EFL learners respectively?
- 2) What are the similarities and differences between the use of “but” by two groups?
- 3) What are the causes of the differences?

3 Research Methods

3.1 Data Collection

Three corpora were used in the current study: the Spoken English Corpus of Chinese Learners (SECCL), the British Academic Spoken English (BASE), and the Michigan Corpus of Academic Spoken English (MICASE). Their basic information is presented in **Table 2**. SECCL contains samples of TEM 4 oral tests of Chinese English majors, which can show the condition of Chinese EFL learners’ use of “but” in the tests. BASE and MICASE involve the data of spoken English in academic settings in England and America respectively, together offering a rather comprehensive picture of native speakers’ use of “but”. Generally, the three corpora are highly comparable in terms of the time span and composition.

The current study used AntConc 3.5.9 to extract all sentences containing “but” (as a conjunction) from the three corpora. Invalid samples were manually excluded, and 400 valid sentences were randomly selected (133 from SECCL, 157 from BASE+MICASE).

Table 2. Basic Information of the Corpora.

Corpora	Composition of Texts	Time Span	Overall Size	Valid Sample Size (for This Study)
BASE	Lectures, seminars	1998-2005	1644942	76
MICASE	Lectures, seminars, theses defense, interviews, conferences, etc.	1996-2001	1848364	81
SECCL	Retelling, monologues, conversations	2003-2006	779731	133

3.2 Data Coding

The selected hits were then strictly coded in terms of the rhetorical relations they embodied. In order to reduce the influence of subjectivity on the results, the coding process involved two researchers, including an inter-coder invited to code 30% of the data. The index of Kappa generated by the initial consistency test was 0.989, which demonstrated that the consistency of coding was good^[14]. The results manifested 6 major relations expressed by “but”: Concession, Antithesis, Conjunction, Contrast, Joint and Sequence. Their definitions are available on <http://www.sfu.ca/rst/index.html>.

3.3 Data Analysis

Chi-square tests were conducted to check whether there were significant differences in the use of “but” between the two groups, followed by the calculation of adjusted standardized residuals for each type of relation so as to discover the overuse or underuse of specific relations among Chinese EFL learners. Based on the similarities and differences identified via the analyzed data, possible reasons for the results were discussed.

4 Results and Discussion

4.1 Chinese EFL learners' Use of Rhetorical Relations Expressed by “But”

As shown in **Table 3**, there were 12 rhetorical relations expressed by “but” used by Chinese EFL learners. Concession was the most adopted one (n=65, 48.87%), and its frequency was well ahead of other relations, which indicated that the use of Concession expressed by “but” was salient among Chinese EFL learners. Four types of multi-nuclear relations, Conjunction (n=21, 15.79%), Contrast (n=14, 10.53%), Joint (n=11, 8.27%) and Sequence (n=7, 5.26%), followed successively. Then there were Antithesis and Evaluation, either of them accounting for 3.01% of the total proportion, and the left relations were used even less.

Table 3. The Types of Rhetorical Relations Used by Chinese EFL Learners.

Rhetorical Relations	Frequency	Percentage
Concession	65	48.87%
Conjunction	21	15.79%
Contrast	14	10.53%
Joint	11	8.27%
Sequence	7	5.26%
Antithesis	4	3.01%
Evaluation	4	3.01%
Others (Solutionhood, Volitional cause, Elaboration, Unconditional, Disjunction)	7	5.26%

4.2 Native Speakers' Use of Rhetorical Relations Expressed by “But”

Table 4 showed that there were 12 rhetorical relations expressed by “but” used by native speakers. The frequency of Conjunction (n=43, 27.39%) ranked first, closely followed by that of Concession (n=39, 24.84%). Then there were Joint (n=29, 18.47%), Contrast (n=18, 11.46%) and Antithesis (n=14, 8.92%). The left relations were all of exceptionally low frequency.

Table 4. The Types of Rhetorical Relations Used by Native Speakers.

Rhetorical Relations	Frequency	Percentage
Conjunction	43	27.39%
Concession	39	24.84%
Joint	29	18.47%
Contrast	18	11.46%
Antithesis	14	8.92%
Others (Condition, Elaboration, Interpretation, Volitional cause, Evaluation, Solutionhood, Disjunction)	14	8.92%

4.3 Comparisons between Chinese EFL Learners and Native Speakers

Shared Features of the Two Groups’ Use of “But”. Among all the rhetorical relations, Concession (48.87%, 24.84%), Contrast (10.53%, 11.46%), Conjunction (15.79%, 27.39%) and Joint (8.27%, 18.47%) were the four most frequently used ones by both Chinese EFL learners and native speakers. While there were slight differences in their rankings, these four relations accounted for more than 80% of the total proportion in the two groups (83.46%, 82.16%).

The high frequency of Concession and Contrast found in the current study is consistent with expectations since most previous studies and existing authoritative textbooks have defined “but” as a contrastive or concessive conjunction^{[11][17][29]}. Halliday^[8] described the adversative function of “but” as “X and conversely Y” (p. 230), which resembled Contrast relation in RST. He also described the concessive function of “but” as “if P happens, then it is contrary to the expectation Q” (p. 234). Although this definition was different from that of Concession in RST, “violations of expectations” could be seen as a sub-category of this rhetorical relation. For example, in (1), the writer did not deny that he made great efforts. The incompatibility lied in the conflict between the expected result and the real situation, which increased the reader’s concern for the fact that he failed. Such correspondence between the definitions of various rhetorical relations and previous taxonomies of the functions of “but” has further confirmed the rationale for applying RST in the investigation of the use of conjunctions.

1. He tried hard to enter the school union (Satellite) but failed (Nucleus).

According to RST, Conjunction connects two comparable nuclei which are conjoined to form a unit. However, deficiencies were found in this definition during data analysis in the current study. In some circumstances, the two nuclei were not only able to form a unit, but also had the effect of increasing the reader’s inclination, which resembled presentational relations. The effects were often achieved through readers’ different attitudes instead of through literal incompatibility. For instance, in (2), the two nuclei described different aspects of a single object. They were not in conflict considering their literal meaning, but the reader probably held a positive attitude towards being beautiful (compared with being ugly in the dimension of appearance), and held a negative attitude towards being useless (compared with being useful in the dimension of utility). The opposite emotions could increase the reader’s concern for the fact that it was useless. This relation probably belonged to the category of “reduced transition” in previous literature^[34], where “but” almost lost the meaning of semantic contrast and became similar with “and”.

2. It’s beautiful (Nucleus 1) but it really can’t get you anywhere (Nucleus 2).

Joint represents the lack of a rhetorical relation between two nuclei. It often serves as a marker of speaker-return: making claims for the floor and allowing the speaker to return to the point^[26]. The high frequency of Joint relation showed that both Chinese EFL learners and native speakers preferred using “but” as a discourse marker in spoken discourse.

Differences Between the two Groups’ Use of “But”. The Chi-square test results (Table 5) have revealed that there were significant differences in the use of rhetorical relations expressed by “but” between Chinese EFL learners and native speakers ($\chi^2=10.013$, $p=0.007<0.01$). Most of the time, native speakers intended to convey multinuclear relations ($n=91$, 58.0%) via the use of “but”, while Chinese EFL learners expressed presentational relations ($n=69$, 51.9%) more often.

Table 5. Chi-square Test Results of the General Distributions of Rhetorical Relations between Two Groups.

	Chinese EFL Learners	Native Speakers	χ^2	p
Presentational Relations	69 (51.9%)	53 (33.7%)	10.013	0.007
Subject matter Relations	10 (7.5%)	13 (8.3%)		
Multinuclear Relations	54 (40.6%)	91 (58.0%)		
Relations	133 (100.0%)	157 (100.0%)		

* $p < 0.05$ ** $p < 0.01$

In order to delve into Chinese EFL learners’ overuse and underuse of specific rhetorical relations, adjusted standardized residuals were calculated using SPSS 26.0. **Table 6** showed that Concession ($|AR|=4.3>1.96$) and Sequence ($|AR|=2.9>1.96$) were overused, and Antithesis ($|AR|=2.1>1.96$), Conjunction ($|AR|=2.4>1.96$) and Joint ($|AR|=2.5>1.96$) were underused among Chinese EFL learners.

Table 6. Comparisons of each Rhetorical Relation between Chinese EFL Learners and Native Speakers.

		Chinese EFL learners	Native speakers
Antithesis	Expected count	8.3	9.7
	Adjusted residual	-2.1	2.1
Concession	Expected count	47.7	56.3
	Adjusted residual	4.3	-4.3
Conjunction	Expected count	29.4	34.6
	Adjusted residual	-2.4	2.4
Joint	Expected count	18.3	21.7
	Adjusted residual	-2.5	2.5
Sequence	Expected count	3.2	3.8
	Adjusted residual	2.9	-2.9

Reasons for the Differences. As presented in the above results, the study has found that Chinese EFL learners tend to overuse Concession and Sequence, and underuse Antithesis, Conjunction and Joint. This section examines the underlying causes of these differences.

A large number of previous studies has attached great significance to the role of L1 transfer in accounting for the differences between Chinese EFL learners and native speakers^{[5][15]}. In addition to this core factor, the current study further delves into the mediating mechanisms involved and moderating factors so as to achieve a comprehensive understanding of the reasons behind Chinese EFL learners’ overuse and misuse.

While previous studies have noted that RST’s text-centric focus limits its applicability to contextualized discourse analysis^[16], it remains a representative theory in systemic functional linguistics, offering a framework for analyzing communicative functions of text organization^[19]. The current study placed emphasis on recognizable and stable RST relations instead of all dynamic features in spoken discourse, and only investigated into those where significant differences occurred, thus reflecting the systematic features of the use of “but” by the two groups.

Overuse of Concession and Underuse of Antithesis in Chinese EFL Learners. Among all the rhetorical relations, Concession is a relatively complex one since it requires psychologically manipulative techniques, whose goal is to increase readers’ positive regard for the Nucleus by indirectly negating the Satellite^[24]. However, there was a significant overuse of this relation among Chinese EFL learners as revealed in **Table 6**.

It has been found that one typical situation when Chinese EFL learners used this relation is when they are to propose their arguments after briefly or even unwillingly show their partial agreement to the previous speaker. For example, in (3), B intended to display politeness and make his claim more acceptable by first acknowledging the A’s viewpoint.

3. A: I think the plane is fast, clear, quiet, and you can see many sights from the high space. Yes?
 B: Yes (Satellite). But it's reported that the travel by plane is very dangerous (Nucleus).

In contrast, native speakers, when faced with similar situations which involved disagreement, did not tend to avoid conflicts in conversations, as shown in their more frequent use of Antithesis than Chinese EFL learners. A typical collocation used by native speakers was “not...but...”, connecting two pieces of information that could not be approved by the writer simultaneously. Via the use of this structure, the writers often intend to stress the information that they favored, and clearly negated the other one, which could be seen as impolite in Chinese culture.

Thus, what lies behind Chinese EFL learners’ overuse of Concession and underuse of Antithesis is essentially pragmatic transfer—the carryover of L1-based communicative norms of politeness into L2 production^[13]. In Chinese culture, disagreement is typically managed through an indirect approach that preserves interpersonal harmony, a principle rooted in the Confucian emphasis on face-saving^[4]. When Chinese EFL learners engaged in English conversation, they unconsciously transferred this culturally preferred communicative norm, leading to the frequent use of Concession as a politeness strategy. However, learners could, in principle, consciously monitor their speech and suppress L1-influenced patterns in favor of L2-appropriate alternatives. The fact that they could not points to the mediating role of cognitive mechanisms in L2 processing.

From the perspective of the Competition Model, language processing involves multiple cues competing for activation. Cues acquire cue strength based on two properties: availability and reliability^[18]. When multiple cues conflict, the one with the greatest cue strength wins the competition. For Chinese EFL learners, the L1-based pragmatic norm of indirect disagreement has gained much more cue strength through a lifetime of

socialization than the L2 form of direct opposition (Antithesis) which has been encountered only in classroom contexts and lacks comparable strength.

Meanwhile, this cognitive process was also moderated by the huge cognitive load posed by the task of L2 oral production^{[12][27]}. In order to relieve the cognitive pressure, speakers often turn to the most accessible and familiar L2 forms. For Chinese EFL learners, compared with “although”, “despite”, “however” and many other alternatives to express Concession, “but” could be extracted with minimal effort because the mapping between the form “but” and the function of Concession has become highly proceduralized^[18].

Underuse of Conjunction and Joint in Chinese EFL Learners. Conjunction and Joint are two multinuclear relations underused by Chinese EFL learners. The current research found that in many cases when native speakers used these two relations, it is not necessary to add a conjunction between the two clauses if the message is translated into Chinese. For example, in (4), the two clauses both concerned the information on the slide, which could exist as two separate sentences without any logical connectors in Chinese. In (5), the Nucleus draws the topic back to the content of example after inserting the description of the language used in the example. Since Chinese puts little emphasis on grammar, this kind of abrupt changes could be connected without explicit conjunctions. Such instances essentially embody the paratactic nature of Chinese and the hypotactic nature of English^[22]. In Chinese, discourse coherence is achieved primarily through semantic and contextual inference, while English often adopts explicit grammatical markers.

4. In the next slide, you see forests there (Nucleus 1), but then you see a patch of forest that has been cut down (Nucleus 2).
5. Here is an example, || I’m sorry it’s a little bit in French (Nucleus 1), but this is the weight of small potatoes (Nucleus 2), middling potatoes...

The cognitive process involved in Chinese EFL learners’ decision to omit the use of conjunctions in Conjunction and Joint has been revealed by MacWhinney^[18], who proposed that despite adults’ great efforts to think in the object language, they often turn to their L1 system given their incomplete L2, and then directly translate the message from L1 to L2.

Nevertheless, the underuse of Conjunction found in this study contradicts previous research to some extent. Zhang and Liu^[33] have reported the overuse of the collocation “not only...but also” among Chinese EFL learners, which intended to express Conjunction under the framework of RST. They attributed this phenomenon to the extensive input from grammar books or textbooks. Thus, the incompatibility found in the current study may indicate that Chinese advanced EFL learners are not constrained by the knowledge of fixed collocations shown in grammar books to a certain degree. However, the influence of different registers should not be overlooked: Zhang and Liu^[33] focused on written English while the current research analyzed spoken English. Compared with written discourse, spoken English requires a higher level of instantaneity and poses a challenge to cognitive processing^{[12][30]}. With a limited cognitive capacity, students

probably prioritize conveying the message effectively and accurately over polishing the expressions.

Overuse of Sequence in Chinese EFL Learners. Sequence was the only multinuclear relation overused by Chinese EFL learners, in contrast to Conjunction and Joint where significant underuse occurred. While RST defines this relation as a multinuclear one that presents a succession relationship, the semantic meaning of “but” endows it with additional underlying contrast or conflict in the current study, which is similar with Conjunction mentioned above. For instance, in (6), the succession relation was clearly illustrated between the act of telling my friends and that of receiving their response. Nonetheless, the reader could deduce the conflict embedded in the discourse that my previous viewpoints were inconsistent with the facts my friends knew.

6. When I returned home, I was so sad. || Then I told the facts to my friends (Nucleus 1), but they all told me that in fact, I was wrong (Nucleus 2). || My parents really love me.

Such cases reflect the paratactic feature of Chinese, where coherence and logic of the whole discourse is internalized and manifests itself through the use of “but”. While the core reason for the difference in the expression of Conjunction, Joint, and Sequence between the two groups is the same, its influence on the use of Sequence differs from that on Conjunction and Joint. As analyzed in the previous section, for additive or coordinative relations, Chinese speakers routinely omit conjunctions, and learners transfer this strategy directly into English, resulting in underuse. Sequence, by contrast, involves the requirement to anchor events temporally in both Chinese and English despite different means to satisfy it^[20], which explains why Sequence, unlike Conjunction and Joint, is not left unmarked.

The mediating mechanism involved in Chinese EFL learners’ wrong decision on conjunctions to express Sequence lies in their overgeneralization of “but”. It is common for L2 learners to treat a single linguistic form as a “universal operator”, and apply it across diverse contexts^[25]. In the current study, Chinese EFL learners failed to distinguish the structural contrast inherent in the rhetorical relation itself and pragmatic contrast inferred from the context. The categorical blurring led learners to apply “but” to any perceived contrast. Therefore, it is important for L2 learners to identify the scope of the use of conjunctions^[31].

5 Conclusion

In a nutshell, via the comparison between Chinese EFL learners and native speakers in the use of the conjunction “but” under the guidance of RST, the current study has found that (1) Concession, Contrast, Conjunction and Joint are the most common rhetorical relations expressed with the use of “but” in both groups; (2) Chinese EFL learners tend to overuse Concession and Sequence, and underuse Antithesis, Conjunction and Joint; (3) The differences between two groups can be interpreted by L1 transfer, where the typological and pragmatic differences between L1 and L2 impede Chinese EFL

learners' L2 processing on the cognitive level. Generally, there remains significant differences between Chinese EFL learners' and native speakers' use of "but". As pointed out by Pawley and Syder^[21], Chinese EFL learners may use this conjunction grammatically, but not idiomatically. Thus, learning about the specific differences between the two groups can offer some valuable pedagogical suggestions on English conjunction teaching in spoken discourse. He^[9] has suggested the application of corpora in the teaching of spoken English. Besides traditional textbooks, more complex contexts presented in the corpora may help students better learn the idiomatic use of a certain conjunction.

Besides pedagogical implications, the results also indicated that there were deficiencies in applying RST to explain complex and flexible use of relations in spoken discourse. Therefore, it is necessary to revise the original theoretical framework mainly used for written discourse, including the classifications and definitions of rhetorical relations, in order to better adapt to the analysis of spoken discourse.

Nevertheless, the study is mainly limited in terms of the sample size and the age of the corpora. Thus, only preliminary conclusions can be drawn from the comparison between two groups. Future research is recommended to adopt larger, contemporary corpora to explore temporal changes in the use of "but", and combine corpus analysis with interviews to further explore learners' cognitive perceptions.

Disclosure of Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare that are relevant to the content of this article.

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