

Article

# The Use of Mobile Instant Messaging in English Language Teaching: The Case of South Korea

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**Abstract:** While learning management systems and video conferencing platforms have become a pivotal means for implementing emergency remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, the integration of mobile technologies into online teaching has been largely recommended in order to create an interactive educational environment. Focusing on the case of an English Language Program in South Korea, this study investigates the actual use of mobile instant messaging (MIM) applications as a learning aid in online language classrooms and how this was implemented in creating interactive language learning environments during the current outbreak. Based on a questionnaire survey collected from 979 students, it then compares students' level of perceived satisfaction with their language learning and communication in online language classrooms between the group of students that used MIM during instruction and the group that did not. The discussion presented in this paper provides language educators, school administrators and policymakers at all levels with practical suggestions and ideas to consider, given that our daily communication has become highly dependent on and is increasingly mediated by mobile digital communication technologies and new media.

**Keywords:** mobile instance messaging; digital language learning; mobile learning technology; distance language learning; COVID-19



**Citation:** Chung, S.-J.; Choi, L.J. The Use of Mobile Instant Messaging in English Language Teaching: The Case of South Korea. *Educ. Sci.* **2023**, *13*, 110. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci13020110>

Academic Editors: Cristina A. Huertas-Abril and Francisco J. Palacios-Hidalgo

Received: 19 October 2022

Revised: 22 December 2022

Accepted: 17 January 2023

Published: 19 January 2023



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## 1. Introduction

As the COVID-19 pandemic took hold of the world, many countries implemented emergency remote learning for students so that they could continue their education. As recent studies have shown, transitioning from face-to-face to online teaching requires teachers to engage in extensive professional training and gain related digital teaching experience in order to develop new approaches to education and acquire new competencies and skills in online learning and teaching environments [1–4]. During the current outbreak, many teachers, however, were forced to make a rapid transition to online teaching without receiving adequate training or timely support. This abrupt transition was particularly challenging for language teachers who needed to create an interactive online language learning environment and to encourage students to engage in meaningful online interaction [5–7].

Like many other institutions around the world, most South Korean schools and universities first delayed the start of the school year, and then began to quickly implement emergency remote learning. While learning management systems (LMSs) and video conferencing platforms have become a pivotal means for implementing emergency remote learning, the integration of mobile technologies into online teaching has been largely recommended by the government and institutional administrators in order to create an interactive educational environment. In particular, the use of mobile instant messaging (MIM) applications as learning aids has been continuously recommended by the Ministry of Education of South Korea to monitor and encourage students' self-regulated learning [8]. In this context, MIM applications such as KakaoTalk have become one of the most frequently used tools across different institutions in South Korea, which could help students engage in self-regulated, interactive and collaborative language learning [9].

While MIM has been widely seen as an effective learning aid in language classrooms, little research has empirically examined how MIM is utilized in language learning and how satisfied language learners are with their overall experiences with MIM. Focusing on the case of an English Language Program in South Korea, this study investigates the actual use of MIM applications in online language classrooms and the perceived level of satisfaction of MIM in creating interactive language learning environments during the current outbreak. Based on a questionnaire survey collected from 979 students, it then addresses the following two questions:

1. Are there differences in students' perceived level of satisfaction in online EFL instruction, assessment, use of language, level of interaction between the students that used MIM during instruction and those who did not?
2. For what purposes are MIM applications used in EFL classrooms?

The discussion presented in this paper provides language educators, school administrators and policymakers at all levels with practical suggestions and ideas to consider, given that our daily communication has become highly dependent on and is increasingly mediated by mobile digital communication technologies and new media.

## 2. Mobile Instant Messaging (MIM) in English Language Teaching

The proliferation of digital communication technologies has fundamentally altered the ways in which we communicate today, and has brought about the emergence of a variety of new textual means of communication, including e-mail, online discussion forums, blogs, social networking services, synchronous text-based chats and instant messaging. These new modes of communication are characterized as “interactive written discourse” [10], “Netspeak” [11] and, most commonly, computer-mediated communication (CMC) and mobile-mediated communication (MMC). As digital communication becomes an increasingly salient component of our daily lives, many language teachers try to adopt new textual means of communication into their language classrooms in order to enhance students' participation and to make teaching and learning more effective and engaging.

### 2.1. Recent Advances in MIM

With the advancement of digital communication technologies and the decrease in the cost of mobile communication, MIM has become an increasingly important channel for our daily communication. In recent years, MIM applications (e.g., Facebook messenger, Hangouts, KakaoTalk, Line, Tango, Viber, WeChat and WhatsApp) have become among the most popular communication tools, with more than four billion active users worldwide. Unlike short message service (SMS) and emails that have previously dominated our daily textual practices, MIM provides highly personalized and user-friendly services through which users can easily engage in conversations in private one-to-one communication and one-to-many communication settings, access and share information anytime and anywhere with their mobile phones, and express their personalities and emotions using multimodality features [12]. That is, MIM offers “a rich context for open and transparent interaction that alerts communicants to the temporal and time-span constraints of the interaction” [13] (p. 546). Recent studies have shown that MIM can be an effective learning tool to increase classroom interaction [14,15], to facilitate peer collaborative learning [16,17], to establish an effective class management system [18], and to improve students' learning outcome [19].

### 2.2. MIM in English Language Classrooms

With the increasing popularity of MIM, more and more language teachers, including many English language teachers in ESL (English as a Second Language) and EFL (English as a Foreign Language) contexts, are trying to incorporate MIM into language classrooms by aiming toward enriching language-learning environments. With the increasing popularity of social media, MIM applications have become commonplace in maintaining relationships and communication. Text-based communication, which is possible through MIM, has

been found to lower levels of anxiety [20] and allow for rich communication due to MIM's characteristic of multimodality [21]. Recent research has shown that MIM has distinctive academic and educational advantages. Compared to other commonly used digital communication technologies such as SMS, emails and LMSs, MIM is more economical and accessible because it transmits visual and textual messages via the Internet, not via telecommunication carriers. With easy access to mobile devices, many language teachers find MIM effective in creating technology-enhanced collaborative language learning environments [22]. Mistar [23], for example, points out that MIM can help students engage in technology-enhanced collaborative language learning by using group chats and audio-/video-conferencing capabilities. Other studies have shown that MIM can provide a more interactive and social platform, leading to higher frequencies of interaction and shorter latencies for initiating and continuing interaction with others (e.g., [24,25]). Recent empirical studies have also highlighted that MIM can motivate students' active participation and engagement [26–28] and lower students' language anxiety because they are able to revise messages before posting them or use non-textual multimodal communicative features such as photos, video clips, images and emojis [29,30]. Recent scholarly work has successfully highlighted the effectiveness of MIM in language teaching and learning in ESL and EFL contexts. In particular, the distinctive features of MIM, including cross-platform accessibility, connectionless communication and multimodality, can help language teachers enhance their students' levels of engagement and collaboration, and at the same time increase their agency and willingness to communicate in language classrooms.

The immediate need to move from face-to-face instruction to remote teaching due to the COVID-19 pandemic triggered interruptions in the process of learning. Due to this disruption, language instructors were faced with the challenge of implementing innovative, yet accessible ways to communicate and interact with their students. Alger and Eyckmans [31] investigated text-based chat data taken from the web-conferencing tool of 40 students in a college-level English vocabulary course in Belgium during online synchronous language instruction. They found that students expressed frustrations during activities through text chat, in which the authors suggested that chat could provide learners with the "sense of community" [31] (p. 13). Choi and Chung [5] found that language teachers without online teaching experience or training prior to COVID-19 struggled to find ways to communicate with their students. Although video conferencing tools like Zoom or Webex provided means for communication during in-class interactions, language teachers in their study also turned to other online tools such as KakaoTalk (a widely used MIM application in South Korea) to communicate with their students. Similarly, Suryana, Hidayat, and Murwantono [32], in their qualitative study regarding language teachers' experiences during COVID-19 using WhatsApp, found that WhatsApp was effective in delivering course materials and sharing other supplementary materials. Language teachers also found that using WhatsApp was effective because students were more familiar with the application compared to other widely used online instructional tools such as Google Classroom or Zoom.

Many previous studies about MIM in language classrooms, however, have used experimental methods to explore the effectiveness of MIM. Indeed, little research has examined the effectiveness of MIM in non-experimental and natural classrooms. Other more recent studies that investigate the use of MIM during emergency remote language instruction were geared towards examining language teachers' perspectives on online language teaching [5] or MIM applications (e.g., [32]). There is a paucity of research examining language learners' perspectives in online language learning during COVID-19 in relation to the use of MIM during instruction and how MIM was used during online language instruction in a non-experimental environment to provide language educators information on how MIM can be implemented to assist language instruction. Therefore, this exploratory study aims to offer insight into how MIM is used organically in EFL language learning environments and to find out whether there are differences in the level of

satisfaction with instruction and communication during online EFL instruction depending on whether MIM was used during instruction.

### 3. Method

#### 3.1. Context and Participants

The current case study was conducted in an EFL program at a large, private university located in the Seoul capital area in South Korea. The EFL program offers a required two-semester EFL course sequence for all undergraduate freshmen at the university. The EFL course sequence focuses on enhancing English oral communication competence and requires students to actively participate in group work to encourage English learning and use. The courses meet once a week for two hours and have approximately 20 to 25 students in each section.

In order to promote synchronous and effective communication between instructors and students as the school was transitioning from face-to-face to remote instruction, the school regularly offered remote teaching tips and guidelines on using various technologies. The use of mobile instant messaging apps, particularly KakaoTalk, was encouraged by the school, as the app is the most downloaded and frequently used messaging app in South Korea. The school provided guidelines on using the KakaoTalk Open Chat service, which allows people to join a group chat room with a link without having to provide mobile numbers. Because the Open Chat service also allows users to create private profiles without exposing personal information, this service was promoted as a method for encouraging easy and fast communication to attempt to seamlessly exchange information and troubleshoot any problems that may have arisen.

A questionnaire investigating students' perceptions and levels of satisfaction regarding the use of MIM in the EFL course sequence was sent via text to all students who were enrolled in the second semester of the two-course sequence during the 2020 Fall semester. Of approximately 3800 students who were contacted via text messages, 979 students participated in the questionnaire, a response rate of about 26%. Table 1 summarizes the participants' demographics. Most participants had no online EFL instruction experience prior to 2020.

**Table 1.** Participant demographics.

Variable	N (%) or M (SD)	
Gender	Male	415 (42%)
	Female	564 (58%)
Age		20.2 (1.9)
Prior online EFL instruction experience	Yes	136 (14%)
	No	843 (86%)

Students were divided into two groups based on whether MIM was used as a communication tool in their EFL course sequence in the 2020 school year. Based on an item in the background information section of the questionnaire, the MIM group included participants who indicated that MIM was used during EFL instruction in the 2020 school year, while the non-MIM group included participants who had not experienced MIM during EFL instruction as a communication tool in the 2020 school year. Of the 979 total participants, 530 participants (54.1%) had MIM experience (hereinafter referred to as the "MIM group"), while 449 participants (45.9%) had no MIM experience (hereinafter referred to as the "non-MIM group").

#### 3.2. Data Collection

An online questionnaire was developed to examine students' perceptions of their levels of satisfaction with regard to their overall online EFL learning experience, with particular focus on students' level of satisfaction on use of language, assessment method, method of communication, communication with instructor and communication with peers

during online EFL instruction. The online questionnaire was developed in two stages. First, the authors conducted a qualitative study with seven EFL teachers in higher education in Korea [5]. The findings indicated that language educators felt that the use of MIM increased teacher–student interaction as well as student–student interaction. The educators also observed that MIM offered learners a common space where they could engage in meaningful interaction. Second, based on the results of the previous study with EFL educators, the authors developed a set of items for a questionnaire to examine how the other stakeholders in a language classroom, the students, perceived online EFL instruction depending on the use of MIM during EFL instruction. The items were designed to investigate students’ overall level of satisfaction with EFL learning and communication during online EFL instruction. Communication was a focus of the study as previous research found that interaction through MIM increased during online language teaching [5]. The items were reviewed two experts in EFL instruction and received feedback on the clarity and usability of the tool. Table 2 shows the details of the questionnaire. The questions, using the 5-point Likert scale, asked participants to choose how much they agree or disagree (1: strongly disagree; 5: strongly agree) with statements related to their online learning experiences. The internal reliability of the questionnaire was 0.9 (Cronbach’s alpha), indicating high internal consistency. Additionally, participants were asked to write explanatory comments for their ratings for each section, so that researchers could investigate and understand what factors may have influenced students’ perceptions and opinions. A self-administered survey with adequate space for free text was chosen because a survey tends to provide students with more autonomy to reflect on their experiences with no pressure to respond or to feel they must provide a set of expected answers [33].

**Table 2.** Summary of questionnaire.

Section	Item	Type
Online EFL learning experience	I was satisfied with the online EFL learning experience in 2020.	5-point Likert scale
	I was satisfied with the overall use of language during online EFL instruction in 2020.	
Use of MIM in online EFL instruction	I was satisfied with the online EFL assessment method that was used during online EFL instruction in 2020.	Multiple-choice
	What was the most frequently used method of communication during online EFL instruction in 2020?	
	Was MIM used during online EFL instruction in 2020?	
Communication during online EFL instruction	Why was MIM used during online EFL instruction in 2020? (only for students in the MIM group)	Yes/No
	I was satisfied with the communication with my instructor during online EFL instruction in 2020.	Check all that apply
Communication during online EFL instruction	I was satisfied with the communication with other students during online EFL instruction in 2020.	5-point Likert scale
	I was satisfied with the communication with other students during online EFL instruction in 2020.	

The questionnaire was developed using Google Forms and was sent via text. Students were informed at the beginning of the questionnaire that their participation in the study was voluntary and that they could opt out of the study at any time without any negative consequences. Students were also assured of their anonymity. The study was approved by an institutional review board.

### 3.3. Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics were calculated to describe demographic characteristics and the level of students’ satisfaction with their online EFL learning experiences. An independent *t*-test was used to assess differences in how students’ levels of satisfaction with their online EFL experiences were dependent on the use of MIM. All quantitative analyses were conducted using SPSS 25. The data gained from open-ended questions were analyzed by using content analysis [34] by the researchers in order to support quantitative data by gaining insight into participants’ experiences and perceptions and were triangulated with quantitative findings. The researchers individually coded the entire data set and grouped

recurrent themes into categories. Based on the initial analysis, the researchers conducted debriefing sessions in order to resolve discrepancies that were observed to represent the essence of the data to develop thematic categories.

#### 4. Findings and Discussion

##### 4.1. Use of MIM in Online EFL Instruction

Based on an analysis of the questionnaire, 54.1% ( $n = 530$ ) of the participants said that online EFL courses used MIM applications, including KakaoTalk and Line as supplementary teaching tools. Of the participants that said that MIM was used during instruction (hereafter, the MIM group), MIM was mostly used to deliver class announcements and to ask questions before and after class. Table 3 shows how MIM was utilized during online instruction.

**Table 3.** Use of MIM during online EFL instruction.

Use of MIM <sup>1</sup>	N	%
Class announcements	449	84.7
Feedback from instructor	167	31.5
Q&A during class	68	12.8
Q&A before and after class	296	55.8
Small group work (e.g., discussions, peer feedback, etc.)	92	17.4

<sup>1</sup> Check all that apply item.

##### 4.2. Differences in Students' Levels of Satisfaction Regarding Online EFL Instruction

Independent *t*-tests were conducted to compare the MIM group and the non-MIM group in order to analyze any potential differences between the two groups in relation to students' levels of satisfaction with online ESL instruction. There were no statistically significant differences in the overall level of satisfaction regarding online EFL instruction, online ESL assessment, or the use of language between students who had used MIM and those who did not. However, statistically significant differences between the two groups were detected with respect to their respective levels of satisfaction on the matter of students' interaction with instructors and peers (see Table 4). Similar to previous studies on the use of MIM (e.g., [24,25]), MIM was found to have a positive effect on students' level of satisfaction regarding teacher–student and student–student communication during online EFL instruction.

**Table 4.** T-test results for level of satisfaction by use of MIM.

	MIM Group		Non-MIM Group		<i>t</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	
Overall satisfaction with online ESL instruction	4.02	0.90	3.97	0.90	0.80
Satisfaction with online ESL assessment	3.78	1.01	3.78	0.99	−0.10
Use of language	4.03	0.93	3.92	0.97	1.74
Communication with instructor	4.43	0.76	4.02	0.92	7.50 **
Communication with peers	4.11	0.98	3.95	0.94	2.58 *

\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ .

##### 4.3. The Use of MIM

At the end of the questionnaire, students in the MIM group were asked to voluntarily write their thoughts about the use of MIM in language classrooms, based on the following question: "Please write down the perceived weaknesses and/or strengths related to the use of MIM based on your experiences, or make suggestions about the use of MIM in English language classes". Out of 530 students, 71 responded to the open-ended question (13.4% of the respondents). More than 80% of the students who responded to the question stated that MIM served as a satisfactory digital tool to enrich English language learning environments, for the following reasons: (a) using MIM to enable students to fully understand important class announcements, (b) using MIM to extend student–teacher communication and provide

individualized feedback and guidance, and (c) using MIM to create an interactive space and facilitate collaborative language learning activities.

#### 4.4. Delivering Important Class Announcements

The most frequent use of MIM in online language classrooms was to deliver class announcements such as homework assignments, changes in the syllabus, and cancellations. The immediacy and spontaneity of MIM was found to be effective in delivering important class announcements and for sharing student-directed materials, including notes and learning videos.

In the open-ended questions, many students pointed out that MIM, especially its open group chat function, provided them with an interactive space through which the teacher could deliver important class announcements and messages and be able to respond to students' questions or concerns. Here are two sample responses:

*"My professor always posted important class announcements and shared class-related materials on a KaKaoTalk group chat room. I liked it a lot because it was so convenient and easy."*

*"It is often hard to fully understand class announcements due to my limited English proficiency. MIM provided me a wonderful space to freely ask clarifying questions regarding important class announcements and assignments."*

As shown in the first excerpt, many students stated that among various computer applications commonly used in language classrooms including Google Classroom, Blackboard, Google Docs and Moodle, MIM was the most convenient in receiving class announcement and instruction because mobile-based applications allow students to engage in language learning on the move. In addition, many of them pointed out that MIM serves as a "safe" and "less formal" space where they can seek out extra help from their instructors when it is needed.

#### 4.5. Enhancing Student–Teacher Communication

Many students stated that the use of MIM led to an increase in student–teacher communication in both in-class and out-of-class contexts because of its cross-platform accessibility and connectionless communication. Indeed, MIM provided an interactive space in which students and instructors could provide/receive individualized feedback and engage in question answering before, during and after class (see Table 3). Having more opportunities to communicate with teachers via MIM, students reported that they felt they received additional support and guidance when needed. Here are two sample responses:

*"I really liked the use of MIM because I could get immediate feedback. Throughout the semester, my professor always gave thorough feedback to all the questions and comments using MIM."*

*"My professor always assured students that it is totally okay to send him KakaoTalk messages anytime because he usually works till late. And I almost always got immediate responses from him. Great learning experience and very motivating"*

As the above excerpts indicate, MIM-based student–teacher communication can positively affect student–teacher relationships and the overall classroom environment, creating a feeling of connectedness and strengthening an established sense of rapport (e.g., [35]). In addition, many students described MIM as an effective tool for receiving immediate and individualized feedback from their instructors while encouraging students to engage in self-regulated language learning and use.

#### 4.6. Increasing Collaborative Language Learning

MIM is found to be effective in encouraging students to engage in collaborative language learning activities, such as peer feedback and collaborative and group projects. Because MIM allows students to create and maintain an immediate but private and safe

space through which they can interact, it tends to enhance students' levels of engagement and motivation [27,36]. About one-third of students who responded to the open-ended question commented that MIM was effective in encouraging them to engage in collaborative language learning activities, such as peer feedback and collaborative and group projects.

MIM allows students to create and maintain an immediate but private and safe space through which they can interact. In response to the open-ended questions, many students pointed out that the use of MIM and its open group chat function enhanced their levels of engagement and motivation, as evidenced by the following two responses:

*"Compared to the in-person group work, I much prefer to have a group work using KakaoTalk- less stressful, less anxious and more engaging."*

*"I enjoyed having a group discussion with others using KakaoTalk. We had a very lively discussion using various emojis to support each other and avoid awkward silence."*

Their comments resonate with recent studies that have illustrated the effectiveness of MIM in language learning in terms of students' participation in peer-based interactions, such as giving and receiving peer feedback or negotiating meanings and co-constructing knowledge (e.g., [27,36–38]). In addition, many students stated that the use of language play elements including emojis, laughing sounds (e.g., hahaha) and exclamation marks (e.g., !!!) in MIM increased their willingness to communicate.

## 5. Conclusions

This paper, using empirical data, has examined the use of MIM and its effectiveness in English language teaching. Many language learners found MIM as an effective digital learning tool that could make English language learning more fun and engaging by means of collaborative and meaningful interaction among students and with their instructors. In addition, they reported that it was relatively easy to utilize MIM in their English language classrooms compared to other digital technologies because of its accessibility and user-friendly nature. The positive experience with MIM then enhanced students' level of satisfaction regarding their language learning and use during online language instruction. These findings expand previous studies, highlighting the effectiveness of MIM in non-experimental and natural language classrooms, giving insights into the relationship between the use of MIM and students' overall satisfaction with their language learning experiences.

As shown above, MIM was found to be a digital bridge for communication that connected teachers and students during online instruction, not only to communicate class-related matters and questions, but also to provide a familiar space in which they could interact and communicate about learning tasks (e.g., [39]). While previous studies have largely focused on the effectiveness of MIM in enhancing student–student interaction during online instruction, the findings of this study show that MIM can effectively increase student–teacher interaction before, during and after instruction, and positively affect student–teacher relations. Many students reported that MIM provided a digital space where teachers and students could engage in student-centered dialoguing and questioning anytime and anywhere and served as a digital bridge to support teacher–student communication and to create a feeling of connectedness in online learning settings (c.f., [35]). In addition, the MIM and its dialogic function enables students to easily engage in synchronous communication with others by using both textual and non-textual multimodal communicative features; hence, it acts to increase the frequency and intensity of their interactions (e.g., [40,41]). That is, MIM provides students with a sense of community and engagement in their language learning that was shown to have a positive impact on students' overall satisfaction with their language learning experiences and achievement (c.f., [31]).

In order to effectively use MIM in English language teaching, there are two important issues that need to be addressed. These include issues of digital access and inclusivity, and digital literacy and digital citizenship.

First, it is important for teachers to consider the issue of digital access and inclusivity before implementing MIM in their classrooms. Even though MIM has become one of the most commonly used digital communication tools, not all students have already used MIM, own digital devices that offer access to MIM applications or have an Internet connection at home. Teachers need to be fully aware of issues surrounding digital access and possible digital inequality so that the distinctive features of MIM, including accessibility and connectionless communication, would not result in marginalizing a certain student population, thereby widening gaps in learning opportunities among students (c.f., [42]).

Second, it is important to provide adequate training and support for language teachers and students to equip them with a certain level of digital literacy and digital citizenship. As many researchers have pointed out, digital literacy for language learning is not simply about knowing how to use technology but also about practicing good digital safety and responsible digital etiquette, while understanding the ethnical consequences of online behaviors. In emphasizing the need for digital citizenship awareness, Hollandsworth et al. [43] pointed out that digital citizenship education empowers students to make safe and responsible decisions when using digital technologies in online learning environments. Therefore, it is important for teachers and school administrators to consider how to raise students' awareness of these digital literacy and citizenship skills when implementing MIM in language learning.

Although this study offers insight into provision of MIM within an online EFL program, it is not without limitations. Because this study was conducted in a single institution, the findings from this research may not be generalizable beyond the scope of this study. Furthermore, more quantitative data investigating the details of how MIM was used during instruction (e.g., frequency, duration, classroom activities) and language development through MIM may provide more support for language instructors on the effectiveness of MIM in online EFL instruction. More qualitative information on students' perspectives of MIM and how MIM assisted them during language learning may provide language instructors and administrators with additional practical suggestions. Given these limitations, future research might aim to investigate other institutions' experiences with MIM or how MIM can be specifically applied to classroom activities. Despite these limitations, the findings of this exploratory study may encourage language teachers to implement different types of mobile technology in their instruction to facilitate communication with instructors and also among students.

**Author Contributions:** Conceptualization, S.-J.C. and L.J.C.; methodology, S.-J.C. and L.J.C.; software, S.-J.C. and L.J.C.; validation, S.-J.C. and L.J.C.; formal analysis, S.-J.C. and L.J.C.; investigation, S.-J.C. and L.J.C.; resources, S.-J.C. and L.J.C.; writing—original draft preparation, S.-J.C. and L.J.C.; writing—review and editing, S.-J.C. and L.J.C.; All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** Not applicable.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

**Data Availability Statement:** Not applicable.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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