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# A pragmatic study of congratulation strategies of Pakistani ESL learners and British English speakers

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## Abstract

People usually express their feelings and emotions positively to others when they have happy occasions. However, the ways of expressing congratulation may vary because the expressive speech act “congratulations” is not the only way to express happiness and share others their happy news. The present study investigates the congratulation strategies of Pakistani English as second language (ESL) learners and British English speakers under the influence of social distance variable. A quantitative approach is applied in the analysis with the frequency of strategies (semantic formulas) being numerically analyzed. The current study recruited 120 participants, and who were further divided into four different groups: 30 British English speakers, 30 Pakistani ESL learners in the elite class, 30 Pakistani ESL learners of the middle class, and 30 Pakistani ESL learners in the lower class. For data collection, a discourse completion test (DCT) was used as a tool. The findings reveal that the most frequently used types of congratulation strategy are *illocutionary force indicating device* (IFID) followed by overlapped strategies (a combination of two), *an offer of a good wish*, *expression of happiness*, *request for information*, *encouragement*, *expression of surprise*, and *suggestion of celebration*, while other types of strategies are not used by the participants. The study reveals the existence of crosscultural differences in the use of congratulations by Pakistani ESL learners. The findings further show how the middle and lower class of Pakistani ESL learners use a more elaborated form of compliment responses (CRs) as compared to Pakistani ESL learners of elite and British English speakers. The findings may help in understanding the pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic aspects of Pakistani ESL learners as compared to British English speakers.

**Keywords:** British English speaker, Congratulation strategies, Cultural values, Pakistani ESL learners, Pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic aspects

## Introduction

Congratulating others is one of the linchpins that characterise human social interaction and is a speech act that is realised in different forms by language users. Pragmaticists note that there are two types of differences when it comes to producing and perceiving speech acts: pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic (Taguchi, 2008, 2011, 2015a, 2015b, 2019; Taguchi & Roever, 2017). As a matter of fact, how language users linguistically

construct a speech act helps us understand sociolinguistic and sociocultural variations in language use (Azam & Saleem, 2018a, 2018b; Saleem et al., 2018). This study explores the pragmalinguistic—and consequently sociopragmatic—realisations of the speech act of congratulating in Pakistani English and British English.

So far, studies related to the investigation of different speech acts (Saleem et al., 2018, 2021b, 2021c, 2021d) have pointed out that the realization of speech acts varies from language to language and culture to culture regarding their semantic and contextual perspectives. In this study, we tackle the construction of the speech act of congratulating in two different dialects of English (Kachru, 1992; i.e. Pakistani English and British English) so as to understand cross-cultural differences in the way congratulations are produced.

The speech act of congratulating refers to an expression of praise and felicity—i.e., a “positive assessment” (Al-Saedi & Jabber, 2020; Lect & Abdulkhaleq, 2020; Tsoumou, 2020; Wardat & Alkhateeb, 2020)—on the part of speakers towards a pleasurable situation or event. Searle (1979) classifies the speech act of congratulating as an expressive speech act in which sincerity is a key condition on the part of speakers. Thomas (1983) defines an expressive speech act (e.g., congratulating) as the act of “expressing, or making known, the speaker’s psychological attitude towards a state of affairs which the illocution presupposes” (p. 106). Thus, Thomas (1983) considers the speech act of congratulating to be an act of “intrinsic courtesy” (p. 132) which exemplifies the Approbation Maxim of the Politeness Principle and classifies it as a convivial illocutionary function where the illocutionary goal is in line with the social goal (Al-Khatib, 1997; Bartłomiejczyk, 2020; Eshghinejad & Moini, 2016; Ghaemi & Ebrahimi, 2014; Haddad, 2005; Han, 2020; Hsu et al., 2020; Kambash, 2020; Kasper & Rose, 2002; Kretzenbacher et al., 2020; Lee, 2020).

Pakistani English (Kachru, 1992) is a variety of the English language spoken in Pakistan. The anchorage of English in Pakistan is that the constitution and the body of the law is codified in English. As a consequence, judgement and precedents, rules and regulations, orders and instructions, standing procedures and other mechanisms of the functioning of the state, and major policy documents of the federal and provincial governments are in English; information, technological, economic, sociological, and statistical, is also largely available in English. English in Pakistan is more the language of Macaulay than of Shakespeare. The large industrial and business sector operates in English. Although introduced in this country through an historical accident, English has become a pattern of life, and its cultural influence continues to be strong.

This study seeks to compare the two dialects of English (Pakistani English and British English) in the realisation of the speech act of congratulating in light of the three social distance (as cited in Saleem et al., 2021a) variables (i.e. close/ familiar, neutral/intimates, and distant/strangers). The first category involves those who have close social distance and the second category involving those who have neutral social distance while the third category involves those who have distant social relation (Al Masaeed, 2020; Danziger, 2020; Nilsson et al., 2020). Elwood’s (2004) list of strategies is adopted to classify the strategies. The research questions are as follows:

**Research Question 1:** How do Pakistani ESL learners and British English speakers use the realization strategies of the speech act of congratulating differently?

**Research Question 2:** How do social distance variables effect the use of congratulation strategies of British English speakers, Pakistani ESL/Elite, PESL/Middle and PESL/Lower class learners?

### Theoretical background

This study draws on the two pragmatic theories of Speech Acts (Austin, 1975; Searle, 1979), and Politeness (Thomas, 1983). A speech act is an utterance (cf. sentence) that “[is] geared towards doing things” (Wardat & Alkhateeb, 2020, p. 15). Austin (1962), in his articulation of Speech Act Theory, reported that when people utter words, they perform an act. Based on their intuition, Austin (1962) and Searle (1979) proposed that speech acts are universal and that they are realised by universal structures. Rosaldo (1982, p. 228) points out that Searle, a student of Austin’s, “uses English performative verbs as guides to something like a universal law.” However, various cross-cultural investigations have shown that the universality of speech acts is far from reality and that both pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic variations do exist in the realisation of speech acts (e.g., Blum-Kulka, 1987; Wierzbicka, 1987). More importantly, studies in the area of interlanguage pragmatics have found that communication breakdowns often result from a pragmatic failure in the realisation of speech acts (e.g., Avazpour, 2020).

The second theory that directly pertains to this study is Politeness Theory (Brown et al., 1987; Thomas, 1983). Politeness may be defined as the act of behaving appropriately towards others. Brown et al.’s (1987) theory of politeness is premised on the concept of face—which was introduced by Goffman (1967). Brown et al., (1987, p. 61) argue that face refers to “the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself” and that face can be of two related types: negative and positive. Negative face refers to “the want of every ‘competent adult member’ that his actions be unimpeded by others” (p. 62) while positive face refers to “the want of every member that his wants be desirable to at least some others” (p. 62). In their theorizing of politeness—and based on their view of face—Brown et al. (1987) suggested two types of politeness: positive politeness and negative politeness. Positive politeness is related to the positive face of the hearer while negative politeness is exercised to redress the hearer’s negative face.

Thus, when speakers perform an act in which they do not respect either the hearer’s positive or negative face, they are in fact threatening the hearer’s face (i.e., performing an FTA). FTAs can be defined as “those acts that by their nature run contrary to the face wants of the addressee and/or of the speaker” (Brown et al., 1987, p. 65). Brown et al. (1987) make a distinction between “acts that threaten negative face and those that threaten positive face” (p. 65). The former refers to “those acts that primarily threaten the addressee’s (H’s) negative-face want, by indicating (potentially) that the speaker (S) does not intend to avoid impeding H’s freedom of action” (p. 65) while the latter refers to “those acts that threaten the positive-face want, by indicating (potentially) that the speaker does not care about the addressee’s feelings, wants, etc.—that in some important respect he doesn’t want H’s wants” (p. 66).

Another very interesting aspect investigated in the current study is social distance variable. Social distance has been studied as an important sociolinguistic variable in the analysis of speech behavior (Wardat & Alkhateeb, 2020) within speech act and politeness

theories. The concept, in its simplest form, is a measure of the degree of friendship/intimacy (or absence thereof) between interlocutors (see Joseph & Alexander, 2018). Social distance is one of the foremost factors that determines the way in which interlocutors converse precisely because it is an important determinant of the degree of comfort or politeness/deference in a verbal exchange (Saleem et al., 2021a). This, in turn, determines the constraints felt and the liberties taken in speech exchanges (Allami & Nekouzadeh, 2011). Regarding specific speech acts, there are those that are used most often among friends and acquaintances (e.g., compliments) and others that are rarely seen among this group (e.g., expressions of disapproval).

In research on speech behavior, the social distance variable has perhaps been most extensively explored in the work of Wolfson (1986; as cited in Tsoumou, 2020). Wolfson's (1986) empirical and theoretical work derives from her in-depth study of the two speech acts, invitations, and compliments. Her findings on these two speech acts indicate that they are used as social strategies with the goal of opening conversations, establishing points of commonality, affirming or reaffirming solidarity, and deepening friendships. According to Taguchi (2018), interlocutors who are already acquainted have the greatest likelihood of developing a friendship (closing the social distance gap) based on such solidarity-establishing speech behaviors as compliments and invitations.

In Al-Zubaidi (2017) analysis of the use of requests and invitations, both appeared in abundance among friends and acquaintances but were infrequent among either strangers or intimates. To explain more clearly, if we view the social distance scale as a continuum, we would find complete strangers at one extreme and intimates at the other end, with friends and acquaintances nearer to the middle. The categories of "strangers", "friends", and "intimates" are not discrete categories but are points along this continuum. These three principal points along the continuum are highlighted in the present study in order to achieve consistency with other speech act research that has studied the social distance variable. The work of Lect and Abdulkhaleq (2020) as well as that of Wardat and Alkhateeb (2020) and others used these broad categories of social distance relationships in their data analysis.

### **Previous studies on congratulation speech act**

A careful look at research on speech acts shows that studies on the speech act of congratulating are few and that the majority of these studies were conducted in non-Arab contexts. For example, Allami and Naeimi (2011) is a study that was conducted in Iran in order to explore how Persian speakers offer congratulations and the strategies they use to do so. Elwood's (2004) framework was used to classify congratulating strategies that Persian speakers use in various situations. Twenty-five men and 25 women of different socio-economic backgrounds were recruited to take part in the study. They were asked to complete a Discourse Completion Test (DCT) that included different situations of happy occasions. The results revealed that giving gifts to the listener, joking, white lies, and exaggeration were the most frequent strategies while wedding and grant was only marginally used.

Within the Duhok speech community, Khalil (2015) explored the use of the speech act of congratulating by a group of Kurdish students. His study relied on face-to-face meetings of special occasions with a particular focus on gender differences. The researcher

sought to understand how male and female Kurdish students offer congratulations in various occasions and to find out the differences and similarities between the two groups in the use of congratulating strategies following the taxonomy proposed by Elwood (2004). The results indicated that the most favourable strategy used by male students was the expression of thanks and wishes which was found in different occasions. However, the Kurdish female students preferred to use the thanks expression. The researcher concluded that gender was an indicator of the frequency and type of strategies used.

The review of related literature has also shown that, of the studies that were conducted, some were cross-cultural studies on the speech act of congratulating. For example, Nasri et al. (2013) investigated the strategies used to congratulate others within three different speech communities, viz. American, Armenian and Iranian. The researchers used a DCT to collect the participants' responses. They also relied on Elwood's (2004) framework to classify the strategies. One hundred and twenty participants were involved in this study, 40 for each group (male and female). In an early phase of the study, the researchers chose 15 speakers from each of the three language groups in order to assist them in deciding on situations that warrant congratulating; the result was marriage and birth of baby. The study included the variable of status in classifying the strategies. The findings revealed that both the Americans and Persians used illocutionary force indicating devices (IFIDs) and offer of good wishes as the most frequent formulas used by both groups. However, the strategies Armenians speakers used related mainly to expression of happiness. The researchers concluded that strategy use is highly related to status of the hearer.

In another cross-cultural investigation of the speech act of congratulating, Can (2011) examined the conceptualisation of congratulating in the British and Turkish cultures. Adopting the Natural Semantic Metalanguage Approach, the researcher ventured to explore the types of strategies used by people in the two cultures when congratulating others. The analysis was conducted using a mixed-method approach utilising both qualitative and quantitative measures. The results of the study revealed that although there were some cultural differences between the two sets of data, there appeared to be some similarities in the conceptualisation of congratulating in both the situation and strategy employed.

In Pakistani context, Aziz et al. (2018) investigated the speech act of congratulating within the Pakistani Urdu speaking community. The researchers aimed at examining the congratulating strategies used by Pakistani English as a foreign language (EFL) graduate students and the types of positive politeness strategies in the students' responses. They adopted Elwood's (2004) taxonomy of congratulating strategies and an adapted version of Brown et al.'s (1987) framework. The findings showed that *illocutionary force indicating device*, *offer of good wishes* and *expression of happiness* were the strategies most frequently used by the students. At the end of the article, the researchers called for more studies on the speech act of congratulating within the Pakistani speech community and more so cross-culturally. The present study represents a response to their call and investigates cross-cultural differences in the use of the speech act of congratulating in Pakistani English and British English.

## Research methodology

The current study focused on the crosscultural investigation of congratulating strategies of Pakistani ESL learners and British English speakers. The study followed a quantitative research design for data collection, and data analysis. For data collection, a discourse completion test (DCT) was used as a research tool. The participants of this study were Pakistani ESL learners and British English speakers.

## Participants

Kasper and Dahl (1991; as cited in Saleem et al., 2018) recommended that because participants' responses in cross-cultural and interlanguage pragmatic (ILP) speech-act realization studies seem to cluster around specific subcategories, 30 subjects per undivided sample (p. 16) who respond to a DCT is a sufficient sample to answer most ILP speech-act realization questions (see also Bergman & Kasper, 1993; Kasper et al., 1996). Therefore, the participants of the current study were 120 participants, divided into four different groups; 30 participants in each group: (a) 30 British English speakers (BritE), (b) 30 Pakistani ESL learners in Elite class (PESL/EC), (c) 30 Pakistani ESL learners from the middle class (PESL/MC) and (d) 30 Pakistani ESL learners in the lower class (PESL/LC). The British English speakers were selected from University of Leeds, and the University of Manchester, UK. Pakistani ESL learners in the elite class were selected from the Lahore University of Management Sciences (LUMS), Pakistan. Furthermore, a sample of Pakistani ESL learners from the middle class was recruited from Government College University (GCU) Lahore, Pakistan, and 30 participants of Pakistani ESL learners in the lower class were recruited from the Punjab University (PU) Lahore, Pakistan. The participants of the current study were selected through *nonrandom purposive convenience sampling procedures*. There were both male and female respondents included in the current study. The only criteria for selecting the Pakistani ESL learners from different institutions was that the respondents should be educated (at least up to the bachelor's level and have studied English as a compulsory subject) and were postgraduate students studying in their final years of the course of study. Moreover, the participants of the current study were recruited on the basis of socioeconomic status variables. The elite class participants include those aristocrats and "high-society" families with "old money" who have been rich for generations. They live in inclusive neighborhoods, gather at expensive social clubs, and send their children at the finest schools. However, the middle class is often made up of educated people with high incomes, such as managers, business owners, doctors, engineers, and secretaries. While, the lower class is often made up of less educated people with lower incomes, such as workers, small business owners, and teachers. Their learning needs may also remain unmet because they have difficulty in accessing information from professional resources. The Pakistani ESL learners and British English speakers, who took part in the study came from diverse majors, including the Master in Management Sciences, Master in Language and Linguistics, and Master in Computer Sciences. The sample of the present study was relatively heterogeneous because they were in contrast to each other in terms of their cultural, academic experiences, and linguistic behavior (British English speakers and Pakistani ESL learners).

### Research tools

Researchers (Tsoumou, 2020; Wardat & Alkhateeb, 2020) suggest that data obtained through the use of DCT, particularly in the key formulas and patterns, are relatively similar to naturally occurring data. In response to situations across different languages, both of them share the same semantic formulas and techniques but vary in their forms, as could be expected. In addition, Al-Zubaidi (2017) states that the most popular method of obtaining large amounts of data from large numbers of participants is to use a DCT. A clear example of this is CCSARP, where the initial project data contained responses in seven languages and five interlanguages to 16 different circumstances (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1989). Every community comprised of 200 informants and almost 40,000 samples of demands and apologies were included in the scenarios. This model is followed in other language studies and in interlanguage studies in which the shared survey was translated into other languages generating large amounts of comparable data.

Hence, the current study employed a discourse completion test (DCT) as a research tool (See Appendix A). The DCT included six real-life scenarios which were designed on the basis of social distance contextual variables (Table 1).

This questionnaire was comprised 6 real-life situations along with their description that demonstrates a particular social context in which the speaker has to imagine himself/herself and had to fill in the responses in English as they were in real-life settings. After each situation in DCT, a blank space was given in which the participants had to write their responses because it is a type of written questionnaire.

### Reliability of the instrument

The DCT situations were confirmed by three professors from Leeds University, UK, five professors from Lahore University of Management Sciences (LUMS). The professors were requested to respond to the DCT in English, and comment if there were any situations which were inappropriate or lack clarity in language. All professors suggested some changes which were incorporated before collecting the final data. Further, the instrument was pilot-tested with 5 PESL/E, 5 PESL/M, and 5 PESL/L class speakers (the inter-rater reliability = .89) as valid and very close to authentic settings. Regarding the time required to fill the DCT, we found that the participants could complete the questionnaire in no more than 15 min.

**Table 1** Situations based on the contextual variable (social distance)

Sr. no.	Situations	Social distance variable
1	Got job	+ D (Close social distance)
2	Winning election	+ D (Close social distance)
3	Permanent job	-D (Distant social distance)
4	Got married	-D (Distant social distance)
5	Selection as sports team member	= D (Neutral social distance)
6	Being a chief guest in an annual prize distribution ceremony	= D (Neutral social distance)

### Data collection procedure

For data collection from British English speakers, a colleague who was studying in the UK, was asked to administer the data collection instrument. Through telephonic conversation and e-mail, he was instructed by the researchers how to administer the research tools and what was the purpose behind the collection of such type of data. Furthermore, the research tools were e-mailed to the faculty members of University of Leeds, and the University of Manchester, UK, and their email addresses were researched from the university website. On the other hand, within the Pakistani context, the researchers themselves accessed the participants at the proposed institutions to collect data from Elite, Middle, and Lower class respondents. For requesting the participants to take part in the study, a formal consent was sought from all the participants. The participants who consented to participate in the study were asked to complete a DCT in English and further, they were asked to consider all instructions mentioned for the completion of a DCT to give their responses as they would respond in a real-life societal context and try to give responses as natural as possible.

### Data analysis procedure

The data obtained through DCT were analyzed statistically through SPSS software, descriptive statistics were run.

In the data analysis procedure, the DCT in respect of congratulation expression was coded in the light of a taxonomy of congratulation schemes offered by Elwood (2004) and modified according to the needs of the study (Table 2).

After the coding of the data, descriptive statistics were run to get the frequency and percentage of the congratulation strategies to examine the differences and similarities among British English speakers and Pakistani ESL learners.

### Coding reliability

A second rater (content specialist) coded 20% of the written discourse completion test (WDCT) data from each group to ensure the consistency of the implementation of the coding scheme. A Pakistani English speaker who is a professor and our colleague in University of Central Punjab, Lahore (Ph.D. in Linguistics), University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, USA, and MSc Applied Linguistics, University of Edinburgh, UK

**Table 2** Classification of congratulation strategies (Elwood, 2004)

Sr No	Congratulation strategies	Congratulation strategy expressions
1	Illocutionary Force Indicating Device (IFID)	Congratulation/congratulations
2	Request for Information (RFI)	How do you come to know about this?
3	The offer of good wish (OoGW)	Wish you the best of luck/God bless you
4	Expression of happiness (EoH)	I am very happy for you
5	Expression of surprise (EoS)	Ooh! Really!
6	Expression of Validation (EoV)	I know because you deserve it
7	The Suggestion of Celebration (SoC)	It's party time
8	Expression of Envy (EoE)	I must say you are very lucky
9	Utterance of Encouragement (UoE)	Good effort...Keep it up
10	Overlapped	Congratulations....Wish you the best of luck--I'm so happy for you!

with 44 years of ESL experience (served as English language instructor in Finland, UAE, Saudi Arabia, Algeria, and Pakistan) coded the two sets of English data, the Pakistani ESL learners and British English speakers data. A training session with the rater and researchers of the current study was conducted prior to starting the coding to familiarise them with the coding scheme and allow them to practise coding some data to ensure their understanding of the task. A discussion session was held after they had coded the data to analyse findings. The reliability of the interrater was high; most of the interrater inconsistencies were resolved through analysis and discussion of the coding manual definitions.

### Finding and discussion

In this section, the frequency of using the verbal types of responses, which are called congratulations strategies, are presented in the order of the proposed research questions. The first research question of this study was asked:

**Q1.** How do Pakistani ESL learners and British English speakers use the realization strategies of the speech act of congratulating differently?

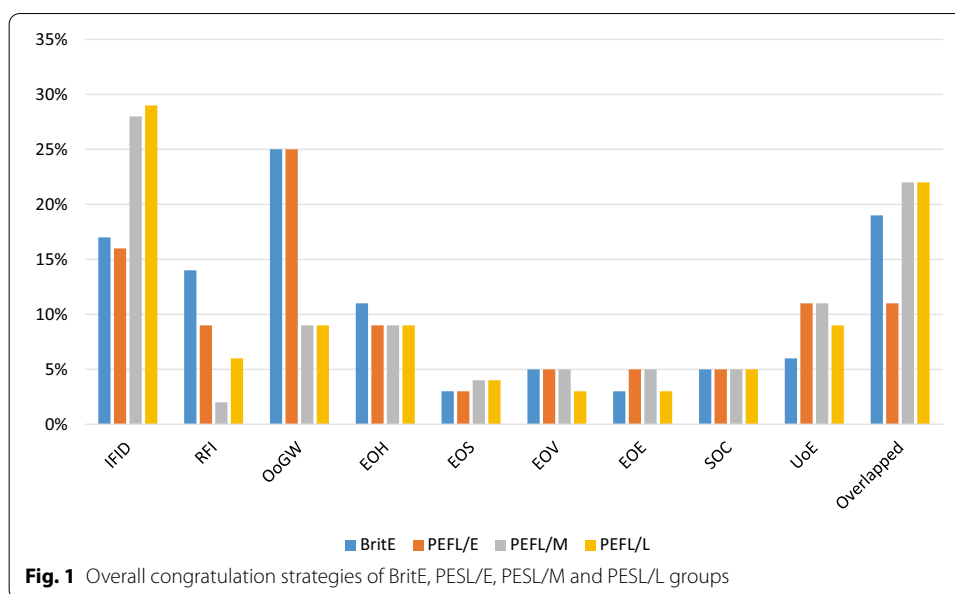
Table 3 shows the frequency and percentages of the 10 types of verbal responses found in the congratulations of the four groups. It is obvious that the “IFID” (congratulations) was the most frequent strategy used by PESL/M and PESL/L groups (28% and 29%) followed by the strategy of “overlapped strategies” (22% and 22%). In contrast, BritE speakers and PESL/E groups employed “the offer of good wish” strategies more often (25% and 25%), and PESL/M and PESL/L class speakers used these strategies with a percentage of (9% each). Likewise, PESL/M and PESL/L speakers, BritE also used “Overlapped” congratulations strategies quite frequently (19%).

In contrast, PESL/E speakers used less “Overlapped” congratulations strategies (11%). Moreover, Table 3 indicates that BritE speakers used more strategies of “Expression of Happiness” (11%) than PESL/E, PESL/M and PESL/L participants (9% each). As regards

**Table 3** Frequency and percentage of congratulation strategies of BritE, PESL/E, PESL/M and PESL/L

Sr No	CRs	BritE		PESL/E		PESL/M		PESL/L	
		Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%
1	IFID	30	17	28	16	50	28	52	29
2	RFI	25	14	16	9	3	2	11	6
3	OoGW	45	25	45	25	16	9	12	9
4	EOH	20	11	17	9	17	9	17	9
5	EOS	6	3	6	3	7	4	8	4
6	EOV	10	5	10	5	10	5	5	3
7	EOE	6	3	9	5	9	5	5	3
8	SOC	9	5	9	5	9	5	9	5
9	UoE	12	6	20	11	19	11	17	9
10	Overlapped	17	19	20	11	40	22	40	22
Total		180	100	180	100	180	100	180	100

%, percentage value of the responses; RFI, Request for information; IFID, Illocutionary force indicating a device; OOGW, Offer of a good wish; EOH, Expression of happiness; EOV, Expression of validation; EOS, Expression of surprise; EOE, Expression of envy; SOC, Suggestion of celebration



other congratulation strategies, as can be seen in Table 3, “Expression of Surprise”, “Expression of Validation”, “the Suggestion of Celebration”, “Expression of Envy”, “Utterance of Encouragement”, all groups were found using these strategies quite rarely with pretty low percentage (Fig. 1).

Although the first *illocutionary force indicating device* (IFID) type was the most frequent strategy used by the four groups, the difference of frequency use was not much in numbers as both BritE and PESL/E participants used less IFID strategies. In contrast, other two groups, PESL/M and PESL/L groups used more IFID strategies (see Table 3). It was expected to find “congratulations” used more frequently than the other strategies because the events were happy occasions or news. Also, it is usually the first expression to utter when hearing something good to express happiness and share the occasion with others. This result is supported by almost all the studies on congratulation in different languages and cultures that found “congratulations” is the most frequent expression. However, this differs from Makri-Tsilipakou’s results (2001) in Greek and Hernández’s (2008) in Peninsular Spanish. Makri-Tsilipakou explained that the use of the expression “congratulations” refers to formality or distance in the relationship between the speaker and addressee. Therefore, the use of “well wishes” is more than “congratulations” in Greek. Hernández (2008) found that “congratulations,” which was used only by women, was less common than expressing approval, happiness, and making celebration plans.

In the current study, “congratulations” was used most frequently in the event of “a candidate is newly selected as chief minister” (62 times) and the event of “being a chief guest, speaker congratulates the position holders” (58 times). Although there is more than one form for mubarkan “congratulations” in Urdu, mubarkan is the most frequently used one. The other form for mubarkan is Mubarak, and it was not used frequently because it is from Standard Urdu. Therefore, the simplest form was found frequently. Mubarkan was intensified in more than one way, often by using various

numbers, such as a thousand, million, billion, and so forth, to intensify its meaning. In addition, it was intensified by repetition, such as by repeating its vowel (a), the expression “mubarkaan” itself, the number itself, or by adding other bigger numbers in the form. These various ways of intensifying “mubarakank” can be a result of the absence of prosodic strategies. Additionally, they emphasize Leech’s (2007) point of view that intrinsically courteous speech acts, such as congratulations, need intensification or gradable expressions. Face enhancing acts such as congratulation also need to be hardened and maximized (Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 1997). Although congratulation strategies lack the physical dimension, the social dimension exists by interacting with friends on activities (Derks et al., 2008). Therefore, offering congratulations on emphasizes the fact that the goal of congratulation is not only to express a psychological state but also it has a social goal that is aimed at strengthening social relationship and intimacy (Makri-Tsilipakou, 2001) among individuals or just to satisfy the social expectation (Bach & Harnish, 1979). Results indicated that PESL groups congratulation strategies were influenced by their L1 culture-specific and language-specific semantic formulaic expressions. They were found using the English equivalent of congratulations (Mubakaan) in Urdu language, except PESL/E group participants who showed a progress towards developing pragmatic competence of the target language.

However, in this study, the results showed that although “congratulations” was the most frequently used, it was not usually used alone. It was used as a single strategy only (160 times) and mostly in the event of “a candidate is newly selected as chief minister” and the event of “being a chief guest, speaker congratulates the position holders”. The comparison of “Overlapped” strategies among the events was conducted based on the top four compound strategies in each event. Therefore, “congratulations” is mostly used with “offer of good wishes”. This result refers to the importance of taking into consideration the patterns of polite compound strategies, and focus not only on the polite expressions alone based on their frequency. The compound strategy of “congratulations” with “offer of good wishes” was used mostly in the event of “a secretary introduces the newly elected sports secretary to the participants”, and “a Chief Guest at the Annual Prize Distribution ceremony”. This compound strategy was followed by the use of “congratulations” with “offer of good wishes” and “Overlapped” congratulations strategies. This pattern of compound strategy was also used primarily in the event of “a family doctor got married who met 5 months ago”, “a friend got a job”, and “a friend got appointed as a surgeon in a government hospital”.

“Offer of good wishes,” as the second most frequently used strategy used by the BritE and PESL/E groups was among the other types of responses, is supported by research by Allami and Nekouzadeh (2011) in Persian; Kočovska (2013) in Latin; and Dastjerdi and Nasri (2013) in Persian, American English, and Syrian Arabic. Some studies in Persian, such as Ghaemi and Ebrahimi (2014) found that “offer of good wishes” is the third most frequently used strategy, while other studies, such as García (2010) in Spanish, found it to be a common strategy in general. However, the different results that indicate a preference and frequency are usually affected by many factors, such as the background of participants, relationship, situation, the tool for collecting data, and so forth.

Most of the expressions used in the current study in “offer of good wishes” are religious expressions, which are prayers/blessings rather than nonreligious wishing expressions.

“Offer of good wishes” was also used primarily in the event of “a secretary introduces the newly elected sports secretary to the participants”, and “a Chief Guest at the Annual Prize Distribution ceremony”. However, the way of congratulating others in the event of “the birth of a baby,” for example, can vary or differ based on the medium of communication. For instance, Willer (2001) found that different words are used to describe emotions and physical characteristics of the newborn boy or girl in congratulation greeting cards. Unlike BritE speakers, PESL speakers were found using socio-religious expressions in their congratulation strategies indicating cultural differences in their congratulation strategies, and an inclination towards adhering to their L1 cultural norms. This way of congratulating is affected by the different genre in the way of expressing congratulation. It was also observed that PESL users tend to employ more than one prayer/blessing or wishing expression in a comment. The use of prayers/blessings as well-wishing is a result of Islamic principles in Pakistani society. Blessings are used by people who believe in the power of words (Wierzbicka, 1987; Walkinshaw & Oanh, 2014; Wannaruk, 2008; Yuan, 2001; Zhang, 2020) however, this power is believed to come from Allah, not from the words by themselves. The use of prayers in the situations of congratulation also were found by Emery (2000) and Bataineh (2013) in Arabic, and by Ghaemi and Ebrahimi (2014) in Persian because they are influenced by the same religion, Islam. This influence was also observed in the other studies of speech acts by Saudis, such as greetings and leave takings (Hassanain, 1994; Turjoman, 2005), compliment (AlAmro, 2013), thanking (Altalhi, 2014), refusal (Al-Shalawi, 1997), and invitation (Alfalig, 2016). However, the use of religious expression is also used in “Overlapped congratulations” in the current study. Although various expressions were used in overlapped congratulations, the religious expression such as mashaallah/Jazakaallah “as Allah wills/ as Allah wills, Allah blesses” was used more frequently than the other praising expressions. It was also used more frequently in the event of “a family doctor got married who met 5 months ago”, “a friend got a job”. It is usually used by Muslims to express praise or happiness when someone hears good news or sees something he/she likes. It is believed that Allah protects the good news/object of jealousy and the evil eye (AlAmro, 2013).

In the current study, some strategies were used infrequently, and most of those were supported by Elwood (2004) and Allami and Nekouzadeh (2011) who found the strategies used with a low frequency. For instance, “expression of validation” was used only on a few occasions by the four groups, mostly in the event of “getting a new position” and “winning an election.”

“A suggestion to celebrate” was used in the current study only on a very limited occasions by the four groups and mostly in the event of “getting a permanent job” In contrast, Al-Hour (2019) found that it is common in *Palestinian society*. However, it was interesting to find that some of the respondents employed some emojis (though it was not included in the scope of the study), such as party popper, confetti ball, red balloon, and so forth to celebrate the occasion.

The strategy of “expression of envy” was used only at certain occasions by the four groups, especially in one of the events, that of “getting a new position” (i.e., The position of “university professor”), However, the use of this strategy was not expected because people usually express their feelings positively and use courtesy in happy events and

avoid negative comments. Therefore, it was not used frequently in the data because of the nature of responsibilities in the position of “professor” in university.

“Expressing of surprise” was used at some occasions such as in the event of “family doctor got married” and “getting a new position” to express surprise, and/or that the occasion was not expected. It was used on a few occasions by both male and a female respondents from the four groups. However, Unceta Gómez (2016) found that expressing surprise as a strategy of congratulation was not used by women in Latin.

“Requesting information” was used by both BritE and PESL/E speakers more often than the PESL/M and PESL/L class groups and mostly in the event of “family doctor got married” However, this result was not supported by a number of studies in which it was found that it is one of the most frequently used strategies (Al-Hour, 2019; Dastjerdi & Nasri, 2013; Elwood, 2004; Nasri et al., 2013; Mahzari, 2017). Nevertheless, people feel more comfortable asking questions about the personal news of occasions in face-to-face communication.

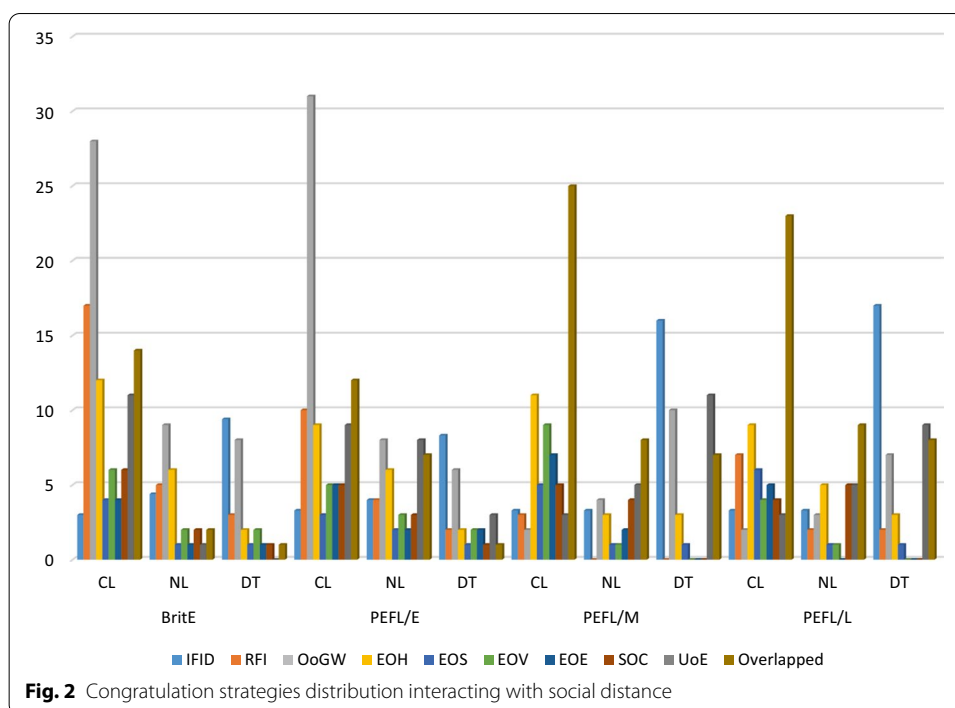
The second research question of this study asked:

1. How do social distance variable effect the use of congratulation strategies of British English speakers, Pakistani ESL/Elite, PESL/Middle, and PESL/Lower class learners?

Results regarding social distance variables show that the respondents of BritE, PESL/E, PESL/M and PESL/L groups used more strategies of IFID (9.4%, 8.3%, 16% and 17%) when interacting with distant level interlocutors. It can be noticed that both PESL/M

**Table 4** Congratulation strategies distribution interacting with social distance

Sr No	BritE				PESL/E			PESL/M			PESL/L		
	N	CL	NL	DT	CL	NL	DT	CL	NL	DT	CL	NL	DT
IFID	N	5	8	17	6	7	15	6	6	28	6	6	30
	%	3	4.4	9.4	3.3	4	8.3	3.3	3.3	16	3.3	3.3	17
RFI	N	17	5	3	10	4	2	3	–	–	7	2	2
	%	9.4	3	2	6	2.2	1.1	2	–	–	4	1.1	1.1
OoGW	N	28	9	8	31	8	6	2	4	10	2	3	7
	%	16	5	4.4	17.2	4.4	3.3	1.1	2.2	6	1.1	2	4
EOH	N	12	6	2	9	6	2	11	3	3	9	5	3
	%	7	3	1.1	5	3.3	1.1	6.1	2	2	5	3	2
EOS	N	4	1	1	3	2	1	5	1	1	6	1	1
	%	2.2	.5	.5	2	1.1	.5	3	.5	.5	3	.5	.5
EOV	N	6	2	2	5	3	2	9	1	–	4	1	–
	%	3	1.1	1.1	3	2	1.1	5	.5	–	2.2	.5	–
EOE	N	4	1	1	5	2	2	7	2	–	5	–	–
	%	2.2	.5	.5	3	1.1	1.1	4	1.1	–	3	–	–
SOC	N	6	2	1	5	3	1	5	4	–	4	5	–
	%	3	1.1	1.1	3	2	.5	3	2.2	–	2.2	3	–
UoE	N	11	1	–	9	8	3	3	5	11	3	5	9
	%	6.1	.5	–	5	4.4	2	2	3	6.1	2	3	5
Overlapped	N	14	2	1	12	7	1	25	8	7	23	9	8
	N	7.7	1.1	.5	6.6	4	.5	14	4.4	4	13	5	4.4



and PESL/L class participants used comparatively more *IFID* strategies than the other two groups while interacting with *distant* level interlocutors.

Similarly, as can be noticed in the Table 4, the four groups used less congratulations strategies while interacting with *close* and Neutral level interlocutors. The *Request for Information (RFI)* strategy was not favoured much by PESL/M class speakers at all. The other three groups (9.4%, 6%, and 4%) were found using some Request for Information (*RFI*) strategies while interacting with *close level* interlocutors. As regards *Offer of Good Wish (OoGW)* congratulation strategy is concerned, Table 4 shows that BritE (16%) and PESL/E (17.2%) groups used more strategies of OoGw when they were interacting with interlocutors of *close social distance*. In contrast, both PESL/M and PESL/L class participants did not use these strategies more often as can be seen in the Table 4 and Fig. 2. Regarding *Expression of Happiness (EOH)* congratulations strategies, Table 4 shows that BritE (7%), PESL/E (5%), PESL/M (6.1%) and PESL/L (5%) groups used more strategies of *EOH* for close social distance interlocutors as compared to other two variables (neutral and distant).

Another difference among the four groups can be observed in the use of the *Utterance of Encouragement* strategies. Both BritE (6.1%) and PESL/E groups used more strategies for *close level* interlocutors. In contrast, both PESL/M (6.1%) and PESL/L (5%) groups were found using *UoE* strategies more often for *distant level* interlocutors. Regarding *Overlapped Congratulations strategies*, the four groups used this strategy with a percentage of (BritE 7.7%), (PESL/E 7%), (PESL/M 14%) and (PESL/L 13%) when interacting with *close level* interlocutors. Nevertheless, the four groups did not favour the use of *EoS*, *EoV*, and *SoC* congratulation strategies more often, as can be noticed in Table 4 and Fig. 2.

Noticeably, social distance is found to have great effect on congratulations strategies behaviors in all four groups. In general, as scholars argue (Avazpour, 2020; Lect & Abdulkhaleq, 2020; Pearson & Hasler-Barker, 2020; Tereszkievicz, 2020; Tsuchiya, 2020; Vassilaki & Selimis, 2020; Wardat & Alkhateeb, 2020), the greater the social distance between the speaker and the hearer, the more frequently *IFID* expressions (direct and/or indirect) are employed. More specifically, people almost always utter *IFID* (directly and/or indirectly) when they are using congratulation strategies for strangers as in the following situation “a passenger is sitting beside you became very excited and happy for being appointed as a surgeon in a government hospital”, and very often, they use “*Congratulation/Heartiest congratulations*” (BritE) “*Bundle of Congratulations*” (PESL/E), “*Congrats*” (PESL/M), and “*Congratulations*” (PESL/L) in their expressions. Further, Avazpour (2020) states that *IFID* (directly and/or indirectly) is also very frequent used with friends but used less with strangers; “*Request for Information, and The Offer of Good Wish*” expressions are used in some scenarios as in “a friend gets a permanent government job” but these appear to be situation-specific. With intimates, “*Expression of Happiness*” terms are found in all “intimate interlocutor” situations investigated, and the number of responses with these *Expression of Surprise* strategies is nearly equal to that of the responses with the *Suggestion of Celebration* strategies in the events like “a family doctor gets married”. The findings are acknowledged by Wardat and Alkhateeb (2020) who argue that when there is interaction with the distant level interlocutors in congratulation scenarios, more politeness is displayed and there are more chances of using *IFID*, and the *Offer of Good Wish* strategies than any other strategies. The findings are also consistent with Lect and Abdulkhaleq (2020) who state that social distance determines the choices of congratulations in different social scenarios. The four groups’ participants, especially PESL/M and PESL/L tend to use more *Overlapped Congratulations* strategies with the respondents of close level interlocutors and prefer to use less *Overlapped Congratulations* strategies with neutral and stranger level respondents. In contrast, BritE and PESL/E speakers tend to use less *Overlapped Congratulations* strategies and prefer to use more *Request for Information* and *Utterance of Encouragement* strategies. These findings illustrate that speaker in these situations tend to be quite interactive and prefer to keep harmonious relation with each other by using “Request for information” and “Encouragement” strategies. Saleem et al. (in press) argue that speakers using these strategies show that they wish to be pretty cordial and amiable with their interlocutors (acquittance and stranger level social distance). Here, the evidence of crosscultural difference is quite clear, as PESL/M respondents and PESL/L class respondents almost tend to use the similar type of congratulations strategies. They are found exactly translating the Urdu expressions into the target culture.

Though this transfer is not negative in nature, PESL/M and PESL/L groups lacked pragmatic competence of the target culture, and could not comprehend the situation as the British English and PESL/E speakers did, and they adhered to their native cultural norms. Further, a positive development can be observed as regards PESL/E learners were concerned, unlike PESL/M and PESL/L groups, PESL/E group used almost the similar congratulation strategies as BritE speakers were found using. Nevertheless, the results are in line with (Al-Hour, 2019; Al-Shboul & Huwari, 2016; Avazpour, 2020; Elwood, 2004; Nasri et al., 2013; Tsoumou, 2020) previous studies which argue that ESL learners

are found quite competent in grammatical competence and are less aware of pragmatic competence. At most of the occasion, especially while interacting with the social distance phenomenon, ESL learners prefer to utilize their cultural-specific responses which are inappropriate and can lead to miscommunication or breakdown with the target culture speakers. Nevertheless, the speakers of this study tend to use more *IFID* strategies with the strangers in events like “a passenger sitting beside you became very excited and happy for being appointed as a surgeon in a government hospital” than the close friends or colleagues and intimate relations. This might be because speakers often tend to look more caring and cordial with the distant interlocutor and use more positive politeness strategies. Furthermore, it is supported by past studies (Al-Qudah, 2001; Bataneh, 2013; Can, 2011; Lodhi & Akash, 2019; Majoko, 2019; Malmir & Derakhshan, 2020; Martín-Laguna, 2020; Meihami & Khanlarzadeh, 2015; Mohd et al., 2020), who found the use of more detailed strategies with interlocutors of distant level and less with close friends and intimates.

Notwithstanding, the findings acknowledge the past studies (Chen, 2020; Dawson, 2020; Ezzaoua, 2020) which argue that crosscultural differences occurred in the production and comprehension of politeness strategies of advanced ESL learners because it is sometimes challenging to perceive and understand social distance scenarios in the target culture. The findings also illustrate the PESL/E participants’ progress towards approximation and development of the target culture’s sociopragmatic knowledge, recognizing the judgments of earlier studies in which Dawson (2020) and Saleem et al. (2021c) claim that ESL assessed the social distance of their interlocutors in the same way as the American native speakers and British English speakers, showing ESL learners’ development towards the target language sociopragmatic knowledge. Although there is found the negative transfer of sociopragmatic knowledge to the target language in a situation “a friend got a job”, yet we can find some development as well. Hence, it may be concluded that unlike PESL/M and PESL/L groups. PESL/E group to some extent approximated the target culture’s sociopragmatic knowledge in their production and perception of social distance variable.

## Conclusion

Considering the results, it can be said that the speech act of congratulation is one of the important and frequently used speech acts in everyday communication as suggested by the contexts where the speech act is realized and the strategies. Especially in the case of Pakistani ESL learners, it is found that congratulations are not only frequently used to acknowledge one’s success, but they are also exchanged among interlocutors on special days and emotionally loaded occasions such as religious and national days/festivals, birthdays, anniversary and wedding days. Furthermore, this study has revealed that the native speaker conceptualization of the English and Pakistani ESL (except elite class speakers) learners’ speech act of congratulation is different considering the contexts of use and the strategies/components. Based on the findings, it is possible to state that English congratulation is more task-oriented, whereas Pakistani congratulation is more social relational (Can, 2011). Specifically, in terms of achievement, English and PESL/E seem to follow an individually oriented achievement motive, while Pakistani (ESL/M and ESL/L) appear to have a socially oriented achievement motive (Ezzaoua, 2020) as the use

of particular strategies in the contexts of achievement has indicated. In this respect, in Hofstede's terms (2011), the collectivist and feminine aspect of Pakistani culture and the individualistic masculine aspect of British culture seem to be reselected in the realization of the speech act of congratulation as far as the data and the findings of this study are concerned.

This study can be considered to have some contributions in the areas of cross-cultural and intercultural communication by focusing on the sociopragmatic aspects of the speech act of congratulation in British English and Pakistani and presenting the cultural knowledge and awareness through congratulation contexts and strategies which will help interlocutors to cope with real life situations. In this way, intercultural communicative competence (Byram, 2012) can be ensured enabling non-native speakers to "survive" in new contexts and interpersonal relations by successfully responding to unfamiliar linguistic, cultural and social factors (Olshtain & Celce-Murcia, 2016).

The current study also has some implications in foreign language education, specifically in the area of pragmatic competence and the development of speech acts by providing metapragmatic information about the speech act of congratulation, which lacks evidence in the literature and in teaching materials (Saleem et al., 2020; Taguchi, 2019). Such information or input based on linguistic evidence could be useful for learners of English as a second/foreign language, who can have the chance to develop cultural awareness and communicative competence. Not only non-native speakers but also native speakers will gain awareness with regard to what is appropriate in the realization of the speech act of congratulation in their own speech communities since for non-native speakers such knowledge is often unavailable at a conscious level (Wardat & Alkhateeb, 2020). In addition, material developers or program coordinators can use the input in developing materials for learners of English as a foreign/second language and thus, incorporate it into textbooks or other supplementary classroom materials. The incorporation of cultural and pragmatic information regarding the speech act of congratulation is expected to increase the number of "small C" elements present in textbooks in comparison with the fact-oriented "big C" elements which have been dominating the textbooks and which have been criticized for their inadequacy in developing cultural competence (Taguchi & Roever, 2017). Other than foreign language learners and material developers, teachers can also benefit from the results of this study, especially in terms of explicit metapragmatic instruction and teachers' pedagogical development as well as pragmatic competence.

## Appendix

### Discourse completion task

Dear Respondents,

Please read the instruction and the given situations carefully and write your answers in English in the space provided under each situation. It is important that you understand the requirements completely, so before you start, you are encouraged to ask questions if you find something you do not understand.

Thank you for your assistance.

Situation. 1: You are traveling and one of the passengers sitting beside you received a phone call and he became very excited and happy. You asked him, what's up? He informed you that he is appointed as a surgeon in a government hospital. What will you say to him?

You:

Situation. 2: You are an anchorperson of the national news channel. An election held 2 days ago and newly elected Prime Minister comes in your studio for his first address to the nation. How will you respond to him on his success.

You:

Situation. 3: One of your friends meets you after 2 months. You asked him, where had he had for the last 2 months. Your friend tells you that he has big news for you, that he got a permanent job at the university. What will you say to him?

You:

Situation 4: You went to visit a place with your father. There your father sees his family doctor, whom he hasn't seen for a long period of time. Your father inquired from him about his absence. He informed me that he got married 5 months ago. What will you say to him?

You:

Situation 5: You are a regional sports director and you are visiting a sports complex with your secretary. There, he introduces you to a newly selected member of your regional sports team. What will you say to him on his selection?

You:

Situation 6: You are working as a dean at a university. You are called as a Chief Guest at the Annual Prize Distribution ceremony at another campus of the university in order to distribute awards among the top position holders of the university. How will you respond to him/her on his/her great achievement?

You:

#### **Abbreviations**

ESL: English as a second language; DCT: A Discourse Completion Test; LF: Lingua Franca; L1: First language; L2: Second language; PESL: Pakistani English as a second language; BritE: British English Speakers.

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### Authors' contributions

Dr. TS provided critical insights and valuable comments for the improvement of the manuscript. Ms. AS conceived the study, and executed it by following some rigorous procedures. Mr. AA collected and analysed the data, including the composing the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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### Declarations

#### Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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