



Demystifying the functionality of group-work assessment practices on students' active learning in English as a school subject: a case of secondary schools in same district, Tanzania

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ABSTRACT

The study aimed to demystify the functionality of Group-work Assessment practices on students' active learning in English in public secondary schools in the Same district, Tanzania. The study adopted a mixed-methods approach with a convergent research design. The target population for this study was District Educational Quality Assurance Officers, teachers of English language subjects, heads of language departments and form three students. Stratified random and purposive sampling procedures were employed to obtain a sample of 402 respondents. Data for the study were gathered using interview guides and questionnaires. Qualitative data from the interview guides were analyzed thematically by transcribing material, coding it and creating themes based on the study questions. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics in the form of percentages, frequencies, and mean scores. The researcher adhered to research ethics, such as regards anonymity and confidentiality. The study found that teachers of English use group work assessment to a great extent, whereby group work presentations were mostly used by teachers. It was also revealed that teachers of English use group problem-solving

activities during the assessment process to a great extent; hence, active learning is enhanced. Moreover, teachers of English were found to use students' group debates in the assessment process to a moderate extent. The study concludes that group work presentations were used by most teachers of the English language to enhance active learning. It was recommended to teachers of English language to change their mindset and be open-minded to embracing various authentic assessment practices in enhancing active learning.

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1. Introduction

In the realm of contemporary education, the importance of effective group work assessment practices cannot be overstated in fostering active learning among students. Authentic group work assessment comprises a form of activity performed by a group of students collaborating and assisting each other to accomplish the given task. Group work participation helps learners to construct knowledge collectively while developing skills in collaboration, communication and teamwork (Lu & Smiles, 2022).

English language learning plays a crucial function in the above context since it gives students the communication skills, they need for both their academic and future career goals. In addition to being crucial for academic achievement, students' proficiency in English is also necessary for navigating the world's growing interconnectedness and globalization (Marlina & Cao, 2020). Therefore, understanding and enhancing group work assessment practices in English language learning becomes a critical area of research and exploration. In addition, the study by Tai (2023) highlights that conducting group discussions as well

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as writing assignments has become problematic because many students struggle to express themselves effectively in English as a result of a lack of vocabulary, developing anxiety when speaking in a second language, and most of them fail to link ideas logically, which would assist them in presenting a clear and concise message.

Different countries have adopted group work assessment practices, leading to various educational experiences and outcomes. (Anteneh & Silesh, 2019). These kinds of assessment techniques assist in assessing a student's aptitudes, competencies, and knowledge in practical settings. Students usually use their knowledge and abilities to do tasks, solve difficult problems, or create significant works (Anteneh & Silesh, 2019). Group work assessments provide more emphasis on applying and transferring knowledge to real-world scenarios than traditional tests, which emphasize memorization and repetition of facts. Group work assessment procedures have been recognized as crucial in the United Kingdom for encouraging learners to participate in active learning in the classroom. Students have also been found to have a positive opinion of group work (Philp & Duchesne, 2023).

In Tanzania, the Ministry of Education and Vocational Training (MoEVT), which is now the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MoEST), amended the curriculum at the beginning of 2005. The main goal was to replace the outdated, tried-and-trusted secondary education model with a more inclusive, comprehensive curriculum that could prepare students with inquisitive minds, employability skills and the capacity to handle a variety of tasks (URT, 2014). The shift to a competence-based curriculum increased the demand for group work assessment practices in public secondary schools. Furthermore, the 2014 Education and Training Policy (ETP) highlights the significance of developing practical skills and competencies that align with the requirements of students and the labor market (URT, 2014). Furthermore, the continuous assessment coordinator and monitor of NECTA identified challenges in the practical implementation of group work assessment practices in Tanzania public secondary schools during continuous assessments (NECTA, 2021).

In the Same district, there is increasing concern about the practicality of group work assessment practices, especially in English subjects, despite the government introducing assessment guidelines (NECTA, 2021). These concerns have been raised due to the ongoing poor performance of students in the English language. In the Same district, a decrease in results has been observed, dropping from 18% in English subjects in 2019 to 13%. (NECTA, 2022). Shirima (2023) conducted a study to investigate the causes of low academic performance, determining that students' lack of success in English was due to not using group work assessments, reflective portfolios, and classroom discussions effectively. These practices have the potential to boost active learning and enhance students' academic achievements. Teachers in public secondary schools are very concerned about using group work assessments, even though

the government is trying to give guidelines for assessment procedures. Addressing these concerns and finding effective strategies to enhance the practicality of group work assessment practices is essential for improving students' learning outcomes in English and other subjects.

2. Statement of the problem

The problem of how group work assessment practices influence students' active learning is increasingly relevant in contemporary education as teachers strive to enhance engagement and collaborative skills critical for success in the workforce. Despite the recognition of group work as a vital pedagogical tool, there is a growing concern among teachers and students alike regarding the effectiveness of current assessment practices in actually fostering active learning. Students may feel that group dynamics can overshadow individual contributions, leading to unequal participation and diminished motivation. Studies by Lu and Smiles (2022), Tai (2023), Bahe and Kilita (2023) reveal a significant knowledge gap regarding the specific mechanisms through which group work assessments can neither hinder nor promote active learning. This gap necessitates further investigation to better understand how to design assessments that not only evaluate group performance but also stimulate individual engagement and learning outcomes. Therefore, the current study demystifies the functionality of group-work assessment practices on students' active learning in English in public secondary schools in the Same district, Tanzania.

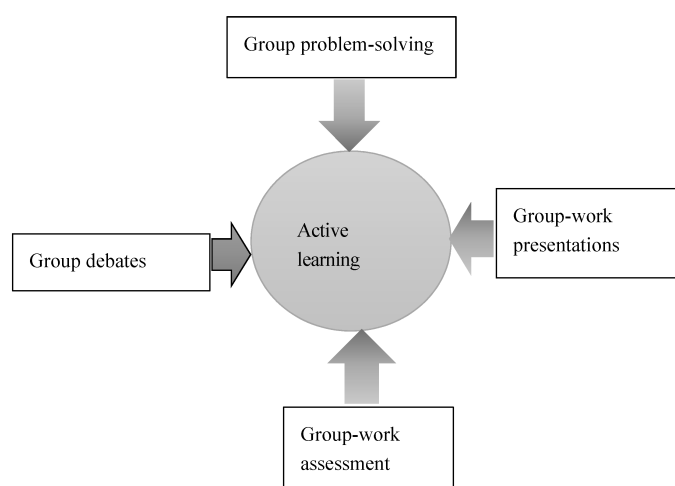
3. Significance of the study

By investigating the relationship between group work assessments and active learning, the study provides valuable insights into how assessment strategies can be optimized to foster collaboration, critical thinking and problem-solving skills among students. Additionally, the findings may highlight best practices for teachers, enabling them to design assessments that encourage equitable participation and accountability within groups. The findings could also add to the discourse on effective teaching methodologies, addressing concerns from both students and teachers about the efficacy of group work. Ultimately, the study aims to bridge the knowledge gap regarding the impact of assessment practices on active learning, thereby enhancing the overall educational experience and preparing students for real-world challenges.

4. Conceptual framework

Figure 1 portrays the conceptual framework of students' active learning in the English subject; the key variables include group problem-solving, group presentations, group debates, and group work assessment. Group problem-solving enhances critical thinking and collaboration, as students work together to analyze texts, solve language

based challenges, and develop solutions. Group Presentations allow students to improve communication skills, boost confidence, and demonstrate an understanding of literary themes, grammar concepts, and writing techniques. Group Debates foster analytical thinking, persuasive communication, and active engagement with diverse perspectives on literary and linguistic topics. Group-work assessment serves as an evaluative variable, ensuring fair contributions, accountability, and constructive feedback among peers. These variables collectively contribute to a dynamic learning environment where students actively participate, engage in meaningful discussions, and develop essential language skills. The interplay of these factors enhances motivation, comprehension, and overall performance in English learning, promoting a student-centered educational approach.



Source: Researcher (2024)

Figure 1. Function of group work strategies in ensuring active learning.

5. Review of empirical studies

This section consists of a review of studies that focused on the use of group work assessment practices to enhance active learning. The researcher critiqued the empirical studies and came up with the existing gaps to be filled by the current study.

The study conducted by Philp and Duchesne (2023) explored engagement in tasks in the language classroom in the United Kingdom. The study used a survey design with a questionnaire as the sole instrument to collect data from the head teachers and community leaders. The study involved 10 schools, 10 community leaders and 10 principals. The findings of the study indicated that students viewed group work positively and considered it important for engaging them in language learning in the classroom. From the findings, the study used a questionnaire as the only data collection instrument, leaving out other qualitative data collection instruments. Qualitative information is very important to understand the research problem from respondents'

experience and perspective skills. By solely relying on a questionnaire, the study may have missed out on important qualitative information that could have provided a deeper understanding of the research problem. Qualitative data collection methods, such as interviews and observations, could offer insights into the contextual factors, classroom dynamics, and nuanced aspects of students' engagement in group work.

The current study addresses limitations in understanding how group work assessment practices promote active learning by employing a mixed-method approach that combines qualitative and quantitative data collection. This includes the use of qualitative methods like interviews to gain a nuanced understanding of students' engagement and experiences with group work, leading to a robust analysis of these practices. Kolstut and Szumilas (2023) explored student engagement in task-based language classrooms in Germany using a descriptive survey design involving 112 teachers and 5 heads of schools across 10 non-randomly selected secondary schools. Their findings favored a task-based approach, noting high engagement during productive tasks, yet the focus was primarily on teachers' and heads' perspectives, excluding learners. This omission may have skewed the findings, limiting the understanding of student engagement. To enhance this, the current study includes learners' views, experiences, and perceptions regarding group work assessments, providing a well-rounded analysis. By incorporating these perspectives, the study offers valuable insights into students' engagement levels, preferences, and challenges, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the effectiveness of group work assessments in enhancing active learning.

Mbuti (2022) conducted a study on the effects of teaching on student engagement in public schools in Korogwe District of Tanzania, utilizing a descriptive survey design and a self-constructed questionnaire. The target population comprised 31,400 students across 346 schools, from which 20 schools and 2570 students were randomly selected, ultimately focusing on 346 students for the actual study. The findings revealed that teachers utilized interactive teaching methods, leading to increased student engagement. However, a notable critique was the lack of authentic assessment practices, such as group work assessment methods, which are crucial for enhancing learners' motivation and engagement. This gap in the literature indicates the need for further research into the effectiveness of group work assessments on student motivation and participation in active learning. By addressing this gap, the study aimed to provide insights into strategies that promote engagement and facilitate active learning in classrooms.

Similarly, Ameir (2020) investigated active learning techniques in Zanzibar, employing a cross-sectional survey with mailed questionnaires for teachers and structured interviews for heads of schools, involving 73 teachers and 4 principals. Findings indicated that teachers often lacked sufficient knowledge of teaching activities and struggled

to implement their knowledge effectively. However, this study also failed to adequately explore group work assessment practices, limiting its ability to inform educational administrators about the actual extent of active learning taking place. Without examining these assessment practices, it becomes challenging to evaluate their effectiveness in fostering student engagement. Consequently, the current study aims to assess specifically how group work assessment methods can enhance active learning, contributing valuable insights to the educational community.

6. Demonstration of the research gaps

The reviewed studies reveal significant research gaps in understanding student engagement and the effectiveness of group work assessments in language learning contexts. Philp and Duchesne (2023) relied solely on questionnaires, neglecting qualitative methods that could provide deeper insights into students' experiences and classroom dynamics. Similarly, Kolsut and Szumilas (2023) focused primarily on teachers' perspectives, excluding crucial student voices that could inform engagement levels. Mbuti (2022) highlighted a lack of authentic assessment practices, emphasizing the need for further exploration of group work's impact on motivation. Finally, Ameer (2020) failed to adequately assess group work assessment methods, limiting the understanding of active learning's effectiveness. These gaps underscore the necessity for mixed-method approaches that incorporate both qualitative and quantitative data to comprehensively evaluate how group work practices enhance student engagement and active learning in diverse educational settings.

7. Design and methodology

The researcher employed a convergent design within a mixed methods approach, focusing on 39 public secondary schools, including 3450 form-three students, 79 English language teachers, 39 language department heads, and 13 District Education Quality Assurance officers, making a total of 3581 respondents. The researcher used stratified random sampling methods to select 358 form three students and 4 District Education Quality Assurance officers (DE-QAOs), with 12 heads of language departments and 28 English language teachers selected using purposive sampling techniques, which resulted in a total of 402 respondents from 12 public secondary schools in the Same district. Data were gathered through the use of questionnaires and interview guides. Three research experts from the Education Department at Mwenje Catholic University (MWECAU) conducted the validation of instruments. A pilot test was carried out in two Public Secondary Schools before the official data collection. Cronbach's alpha was used to ensure the reliability of quantitative data, resulting in $r = 0.715$ for students, $r = 0.862$ for teachers, and $r = 0.795$ for heads of English language departments' questionnaires. The credibility of qualitative data was maintained by using triangulation

techniques. The quantitative data were systematically organized, assigned appropriate codes, and entered into SPSS version 26 for analysis using descriptive statistics. The analysis generated frequency distributions, percentages and means, providing a comprehensive summary of the data's characteristics. The qualitative data were coded and presented in narration and direct quotation.

8. Findings

The study aimed at assessing how group work assessment practices promote students' English active learning in secondary schools in the Same district. Information answering this question was collected from students, teachers of the English language, heads of English language departments, and the District Education Quality Assurance officers. Through their questionnaires, students, teachers of the English language and heads of English language departments were provided with statements concerning some group work assessment practices used in secondary schools, and they were asked to indicate the extent of their practicability with statements. For better interpretation, a percentage scale was used, as indicated by Taherdoost (2019), whereby 90–100% = overwhelming majority; 80–89% = extreme majority; 70–79% = high majority; 60–69% = low majority; 50–59% = moderate majority; 40–49% = minority, 30–39% = low minority; 20–29% extreme minority and below 20% = overwhelming minority. The responses are summarized and presented in Table 1.

Data in Table 1 shows that a low majority (64.5%) of students indicated that group presentations are used by teachers in the assessment process to a great extent while an overwhelming minority (19.9%) of students rated the statement to a low extent, and an overwhelming minority (15.6 %) of students rated the statement to a moderate extent with a mean score of 3.32. Also, the data show that a low majority (62.9%) of teachers indicated that group presentations are used by teachers in assessing processes to a great extent while an extreme minority (20.7%) of teachers rated the statement to a low extent and an overwhelming minority (16.4%) rated the statement to a moderate extent with a mean score of 3.29. Similarly, it was indicated that low a majority (61.7%) of heads of English language departments indicated to a great extent that group presentations are used by teachers in assessing processes while an extreme minority (20%) of heads of English language departments rated the statement to low extent and overwhelming minority (18.3%) of heads of English language departments rated the statement to a moderate extent, with mean score of 3.33. The data from the three groups of respondents imply that most English language teachers use group presentations in assessment practices to a great extent. The findings are associated with the nature of group presentation assessment, which does not require many resources compared to other authentic assessment practices.

Table 1. Students, teachers and HoDs' responses on the extent to which group work assessment practices are used to promote students' English active learning in public secondary schools (students, $n = 345$; teachers, $n = 28$ and HoDs, $n = 12$).

	Statements	Respondents	VLE%	LE%	ME%	GE%	VGE%	Mean
i.	Teachers use group projects as an assessment method	Students	16.8	34.5	31.9	12.2	4.6	2.53
		Teachers	17.9	28.6	35.7	10.7	7.1	2.60
		HoD	16.7	25.0	41.7	8.3	8.3	2.66
ii.	Peer evaluation is used more by teachers during the assessment process	Students	13.6	28.7	30.7	14.2	12.8	2.83
		teachers	10.7	21.4	24.7	25.0	18.1	2.96
		HoD	25.0	33.3	25.0	16.7	0.0	2.33
iii.	Group presentations are used by teachers in assessing learners	Students	3.2	16.7	15.6	48.4	16.1	3.32
		Teachers	6.4	14.3	16.4	49.3	13.6	3.29
		HoD	5.0	15.0	18.3	45.0	16.7	3.33
iv.	Collaborative discussions are used by teachers in the assessment process	Students	4.6	20.9	24.1	38.3	7.2	3.12
		Teachers	11.4	27.7	17.9	29.4	13.6	2.50
		HoD	10.0	21.7	23.3	26.7	18.3	2.91
v.	Teachers use group problem-solving activities during the assessment process	Students	4.6	14.3	16.4	49.4	15.1	3.11
		Teachers	10.7	15.4	18.0	42.7	13.1	3.22
		HoD	0.0	16.7	8.3	75.0	0.0	2.89
vi.	Team-based quizzes are administered to learners by teachers	Students	11.3	35.9	26.4	19.1	7.2	2.75
		Teachers	32.1	28.6	7.1	25.0	7.1	2.46
		HoD	10.7	23.3	25.0	26.7	14.3	2.66
vii.	Group debates are used by teachers in the assessment process	Students	9.6	16.2	14.9	45.1	14.3	3.35
		Teachers	10.7	18.6	10.7	42.9	17.1	3.10
		HoD	6.7	16.7	18.0	40.3	18.3	3.25
viii.	Teachers use group reflections in assessing learners	Students	10.7	18.6	33.3	26.1	11.3	3.08
		Teachers	17.9	19.3	20.0	25.7	17.1	2.50
		HoD	6.3	30.3	16.7	36.3	10.3	3.00
ix.	Role-plays are used as assessment tools by teachers	Students	15.4	22.3	28.4	22.0	11.9	2.92
		Teachers	11.4	15.7	23.0	32.7	17.1	2.46
		HoD	8.3	25.0	25.0	33.3	8.3	3.08
x.	Teachers use group peer feedback to assess learners	Students	10.1	20.9	30.1	26.4	12.5	2.92
		Teachers	13.9	17.9	28.6	28.6	11.1	2.67
		HoD	10.7	23.3	25.0	27.7	13.3	2.66
Grand mean		Students						2.90
		Teachers						2.59
		HoD						2.75

Source: Field Data (2024). Key: VLE = very low extent, LE = low extent, ME = moderate extent, GE = great extent, VGE = to a very great extent.

Moreover, during an interview with DEQAO “D”, they had this to say:

Our teachers in government schools do use group work presentation, though not much. Even us, when we were teachers, we were using those group discussion questions. So, I can say that they practiced, though not very much. Among those group assessments, you can find group projects, for example, a challenge that is affecting the community and asking students in the group to investigate it, but it is not done frequently due to the nature of students and their family background. (DQAO-A, personal communication, 6 May 2024)

At least that is used, I mean group discussion to a good extent. Because looking at the environment and the level of understanding of our students, without using that, learners cannot understand what a teacher is teaching properly. That is why even us quality assurers use more energy to make sure that teachers are using group work discussion. (DQAO-B, personal communication, 3 May 2024)

Similarly, DEQAO “B”, during the interview, reported that:

The data from interviews imply that teachers in the same district use group work assessment practices in their assessment practices to a great extent. The usage of group work assessment might be associated with the nature of group work assessment practices, which do not require more teaching and learning resources. The findings are in line with what was observed by Mweemba (2020), in Zambia, that teachers in Secondary schools were using group dis-

cussions, presentations and debate in the assessment process, though the majority were still using teacher-centered strategies in the teaching and learning process. Another study in Ethiopia by Figa et al. (2020) indicated that teachers prefer to use group presentations in the teaching and learning process due to large class sizes. In Tanzania, the study by Mbuti (2022) reported that teachers using group presentations in assessment practices are more effective in enhancing active learning. This illustrates that teachers in Zambia, Ethiopia and Tanzania are using group presentation. The use of group presentations in the classroom is one of the assessment practices that enhances students' active learning.

Additionally, data in Table 1 indicate that a low majority (64.5%) of the students showed that teachers use group problem-solving activities during the assessment process to a great extent while an overwhelming minority (18.9%) of students rated the statement to a low extent and an overwhelming minority (16.4%) rated the statement to a moderate extent with a mean score of 3.11. The same question was answered by English language teachers and their responses show that a moderate majority (55.8%) of English language teachers indicated to a high extent that they use group problem-solving activities during the assessment process, while an extreme minority (26.1%) of English language teachers rated the statement to a low extent, and an overwhelming minority (18.0%) rated the statement to a moderate extent with a mean score of 3.22. Similarly, the data in Table 1 indicate that a high majority (75%) of heads of English language departments indicated to a high extent that teachers use group problem-solving activities during the assessment process while an overwhelming minority (16.7%) of heads of English language departments rated the statement to low extent and an overwhelming minority (8.3%) rated the statement to a moderate extent, with a mean score of 2.89. The data from three groups of participants imply that most of the teachers in the same district use group problem-solving activities during the assessment process to a great extent. On top of that, during an interview, DEQAO "C" had this to say about group work assessment:

Actually, the group work assessment from what I have been observing is being used. However, the problem is how that particular technique is being employed by teachers to help students to solve challenging problems as a group. You know, for a group technique to be efficient and effective, it requires a teacher to have the students in a specific number, a range of numbers but also setting questions that awaken the ability of students to solve difficult issues in real life outside. (DEQAO-C, personal communication, 6 May 2024)

Data from that interview suggest that group work assessments are being used, though the problem comes with its practical use in real life outside the classroom. However,

studies have indicated that group work assessments, especially group work in problem-solving learning, have a significant role in student learning outcomes. The study performed in Kenya by Mutange (2020) indicated that problem-solving learning occurred more significantly in a county or school where it was used compared to where it was not used. Another study conducted in Turkey by Özpınar and Arslan (2023) reported that learners possessed an adequate level of problem-solving skills due to the frequent usage of problem-solving activities in the assessment process used by teachers. In Tanzania, the study by Kasuga and Maro (2023) indicated that the use of problem-based learning activities in the assessment process increases students' motivation to learn. This illustrates that teachers in Turkey, Kenya and Tanzania use group problem-solving activities during the assessment process. The use of group problem-solving in the assessment process is very important in developing students' ability to solve the problem in a given real context.

Data in Table 1 also show that a moderate majority (59.4%) of the students indicated that group debates are used by teachers in the assessment process to a great extent, while an extreme minority (25.8%) of students rated the statement to a low extent and an overwhelming minority (14.9%) of students rated the statement to a moderate extent, with a mean score of 3.35. In addition, the data in Table 1 show that a low majority (60%) of teachers of English language indicated that a great extent, while an extreme minority (29.3%) of teachers of English language rated the statement to a low extent, and an overwhelming minority (10.7%) of English language teachers rated the statement to a moderate extent, with a mean score of 3.10. Likewise, the data in Table 1 show that a low majority (58.6%) of heads of English language departments indicated to a great extent that group debates are used by teachers in the assessment process, while an extreme minority (23.4%) of heads of English language departments rated the statement to a low extent, and an overwhelming minority (18.0%) of heads of English language departments rated the statement to a moderate extent, with a mean score of 3.25. The data from three groups of participants imply that group debates are used by most of the teachers in the assessment process to a great extent. In line with that, District Quality Assurance Officer (DEQAO) "A", during an interview, said:

Debates are being done, but most of them are done at the school level. So, school debate helps foster critical thinking and communication skills among students because when they put students into groups, they mix them, the low learners and faster learners. So, you know, those of low ability are lifted by those of high ability. (DEQAO-A, personal communication, 3 May 2024)

Information from the interview implies that group debates are being practiced at the school level in Same secondary

schools. These findings concur with the findings from the study performed in Saudi Arabia by Gulnaz (2020), which indicated that class debates effectively generated numerous skills among learners since they raised their thinking skills, analytical skills and reflective skills. Another study conducted in Egypt by Kabesh (2024) indicated that classroom debates are so beneficial for students because they develop students' oral presentation skills. In Tanzania, the study by Fadhili et al. (2023) indicated that debate pedagogy positively impacts students' language skills, articulation and confidence. Learning through debate may be one of the most important skills that today's students will need for the future.

9. Conclusion and recommendation

The study concludes that group work presentations used by teachers of the English language functions in enhancing students active learning in English Subject. Based on the findings, it can be concluded that group problem-solving activities are being used by teachers of the English language in Same district. Moreover, the study concluded that student group debates are being used in the assessment process by teachers of the English language to a great extent. Based on conclusions made, the study recommends for Teachers to change their mindset and be open to embracing various authentic assessment practices in enhancing active learning. In addition, teacher training colleges and universities should ensure that student teachers are well trained in applying various forms of authentic assessment practices since they are likely to expose students to developing competencies which must be practiced in real-world scenarios.

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Author contributions

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S.O. was responsible for the formal data analysis, whereas field data collection was undertaken by G.H.M. and F.M.M. Resource preparation was managed by G.H.M., and data curation was completed by F.M.M. The initial draft of the manuscript was prepared by G.H.M., with subsequent review and editing provided by F.M.M. and S.O. Visualization components were developed by S.O. The study was supervised and administratively coordinated by F.M.M. No external funding was obtained for this research. All authors have read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

Conflicts of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Data availability statement

Data supporting these findings are available within the article or upon request.

Institutional review board statement

Not applicable.

Informed consent statement

The research was carried out with strict adherence to established ethical guidelines. All respondents were fully informed about the purpose and procedures of the study and gave their voluntary consent to participate. Confidentiality was maintained by securely handling all data, and anonymity was ensured by not disclosing any identifying information. These measures were implemented to protect participants' privacy and uphold academic integrity. The authors affirm that no personal or financial interests influenced the study's design, data collection, analysis, or reporting of the findings.

Sample availability

The authors declare that no physical samples were used in this study.

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