

Vietnamese EFL Secondary School Teachers' Practices of Adapting Speaking Tasks in the New English Textbooks

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Abstract: *Speaking proficiency is important to language learners. The ability to structure talk facilitates effective communication with other interlocutors. A strong spoken command positions them to actively interact with their teachers and peers to hone their academic mastery. This article reports the result of a study that aims to identify EFL Vietnamese secondary school teachers' practices of adapting speaking tasks in the reformed textbooks 'Right on!' in a province in the Mekong Delta in Vietnam. This case study, joined by three experienced teachers through in-depth interviews, document analysis (textbooks and teaching plans), and classroom observations, addresses the gap in our concerns about the differences between teachers' self-reported and actual classroom practices. The results show that those teachers all have positive beliefs and willingness to adapt speaking tasks designed in the textbook to hone their students' speaking performance; however, sometimes they remained with the suggested teaching plans in the teacher guide or changed and expanded the scenario but failed. This paper also points to a need to incorporate a sufficiently intensive professional development program of task-based language teaching for current teachers in Vietnam.*

Keywords: Communicative Goals, EFL, ELT, English Textbooks, Speaking Proficiency, Speaking Tasks

Article History: Received: 28 Jan- 2025; Accepted: 05 March-2025; Published/Available Online: 30 March- 2025

1. Introduction

In Vietnam, the recent curriculum reform in 2018 has made attempts to promote communicative language pedagogy. With the support of the National Foreign Language Project, the national curriculum claims to prioritize “a learner-centered, communicative task-based approach” (MOET, 2008). A series of locally-published textbooks has been employed in secondary education to realize this curriculum. Speaking is still not compulsory in entrance exams to high schools and universities in Vietnam. Somewhere, this skill is not paid enough attention in teaching and learning English. This study was designed to investigate teachers' practices of adaptation of speaking tasks in current English as a foreign language curriculum and the perceived factors shaping their implementation in a Vietnamese secondary school context. Drawing on Bernstein's (2003) framework of pedagogic discourse, this qualitative study aims to gain in-depth insights into teachers' task-adapting practices and the internal relay within the teachers' cognition regarding different activities and the sequence of the activities they use to enact the curriculum. This study, therefore, can provide instructive and considerable implications for enhancing teachers' practices in curriculum innovation and is likely to provide concrete resources for teacher education and professional training programs.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Speaking Tasks

The primary purpose of speaking tasks is to provide learners with opportunities to practice their speaking competence to achieve greater fluency. Burns (2019) suggests three speaking tasks: communication-gap, discussion, and monologic. In TEFL, teachers typically implement two types of communication-gap tasks: information and context. Firstly, in information-gap tasks, learners are given different sets of information,

including printed handouts, recorded audio or video texts, short reading texts, pictures or diagrams, and printed texts with illustrations. This task requires learners to speak to one another to complete the task collaboratively. Simultaneously, they must convey meaning through linguistic resources using techniques such as describing, comparing and contrasting, listing, summarizing, explaining, and clarifying. For context-gap tasks, learners are given the same information set, such as pictures and a list of words. They use them to construct new knowledge in new and various contexts for their listeners. Secondly, discussion tasks contain a genuine communicative purpose with which learners must share their ideas by drawing on their background knowledge and experiences and negotiating to arrive at a solution. Finally, monologic tasks are undertaken by learners individually. They can utilize personal perspectives and personal lived experiences to complete the task. They learn to introduce, maintain, and close a topic, use cohesive devices to organize extended discourse and anticipate and share listeners' perspectives.

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2.2. Considerations in Adapting Speaking Tasks

Language learners need ample opportunities to practice speaking English in the classroom to improve their performance in real-world situations. These opportunities are provided through communicative activities in which learners are encouraged and required to use English meaningfully and interactively. Planning effective tasks, nonetheless, can be challenging. Teachers must ensure that these tasks are relevant to learners' needs and sufficiently engaging. As Goh (2018) evaluated, there are six essential considerations when designing speaking tasks. Firstly, it is important to provide contexts where communication naturally occurs. This enables learners to practice language use in realistic scenarios. Secondly, tasks should include gaps and cognitive challenges that encourage purposeful communication. Thirdly, tasks must specify clear communicative outcomes and give learners a tangible goal. Fourthly, teachers should encourage a focus on meaning and prioritize effective idea exchanges over grammatical precision through initial interactions. Additionally, identifying features for pre-task planning and post-task reflection is crucial. These endeavors allow learners to prepare and review their oral performance. Finally, incorporating strategies for task repetition can aid learners in refining their performance and building self-efficacy. More critically, teachers should address further task parameters, which include controlling the agenda and structure of tasks by setting clear steps and time limits and providing scaffolding via mid-task interventions (Subekti, 2020). EFL teachers should consider applying pressure on language production by pushing learners to achieve accuracy. Moreover, interaction patterns and each participant's role-play a significant part in task design, whether learners work individually, in pairs, or groups. Assigning roles and defining the flow of information may dramatically impact the effectiveness of speaking tasks (Milliner & Dimoski, 2024).

2.3. Related Studies on EFL Speaking Task Adaptation

Implementing task-based language teaching (TBLT) has been a significant focus in language education research, particularly in understanding how teachers' beliefs and contextual factors shape their classroom practices. Numerous studies have explored how teachers adapt tasks to suit their teaching objectives and the challenges they face in aligning curriculum innovations with their beliefs and classroom realities. This paper examines the gap in understanding Vietnamese EFL secondary school teachers' practices in adapting speaking tasks in the new English textbooks, using a theoretical framework which addresses individual cognition and innovation diffusion.

International studies have highlighted the critical role of speaking task adaptation in improving the quality of teaching and learning, particularly learners' communicative competence. Jeon and Hahn (2006) noted that teachers hesitated to enact curriculum reforms despite understanding their importance with barriers including limited teacher knowledge and external constraints such as class sizes and resource availability. Similarly, Peng and Pyper (2019) noted that EFL teachers adapted tasks as a personal initiative to overcome academic challenges and achieve their learning objectives. The study emphasized that teachers' beliefs and knowledge were more influential in shaping practices than contextual constraints. Research has focused on teachers' challenges in implementing curriculum reforms in Vietnamese educational contexts. Nguyen et al. (2018) identified a

significant gap between teachers’ beliefs, intentions, and the curriculum’s principles, noting that teachers often worked with textbooks that were incompatible with their teaching philosophies. Dao and Newton (2021) revealed that tertiary lecturers used speaking tasks with teacher-centeredness, prioritizing grammar explanations over learners’ communicative competencies. However, Nguyen et al. (2018) showed that high school teachers often modified textbook tasks to make them more open-ended, authentic, and relevant to students. They aimed to address task unsuitability issues, large class sizes, and limited learning resources.

These studies have shed light on how EFL teachers adapted speaking tasks with different perspectives outside and within Vietnamese contexts. However, less attention has been paid to how secondary school EFL teachers navigate specific challenges of adapting speaking tasks to align with curriculum objectives and classroom realities. The current research, therefore, aims to investigate Vietnamese EFL secondary school teachers’ practices in adapting speaking tasks in a new English textbook, the “Right On!” textbook. Bridging this gap serves to comprehend the intersection of teachers’ task adaptation and practical implementation of curriculum reforms in Vietnam’s secondary education system.

Transfer of learning was adopted as the theoretical framework underpinning this research. This theory links to implementing and re-implementing prior knowledge to novel circumstances. As Perkins and Salomon (1992) described, transfer of learning occurs “when learning in one context or with one set of materials impacts on performance in another context or with other related materials” (p. 3). It is critical in facilitating cognitive and educational researchers to identify key factors that promote and inhibit the transfer process. One crucial contributor believed to enhance transfer is mastery achieved through the initial learning phase. In essence, transfer “assumes learning within a specific context and asks about impact beyond that context” (Perkins & Salomon, 1992, p. 3). Arguably, such influences are unattainable without adequate mastery of original learning. Perkins and Salomon (1992) further differentiated between two types of transfer, which include near transfer of learning and far transfer of learning. Near transfer of learning occurs as people demonstrate improved performance on new but similar tasks following instruction. Conversely, far transfer of learning is conceptualized as implementing knowledge across many contexts that appear unrelated or vastly different.

Transfer of learning theory is perceived as well-suited to the aim of the current research. It explained how Vietnamese EFL teachers use prior knowledge and experience to adapt to new tasks in English textbooks. More critically, they utilized near transfer of learning when adapting similar speaking tasks from an old textbook to a new one in similar teaching contexts. This theory also helped to comprehend how teachers enhanced pedagogical competencies and professional practices in adapting communicative tasks. To achieve its aim, the current research aimed to address the following question

How do Vietnamese secondary school EFL teachers adapt speaking tasks in their lesson plans and classroom practices?

2.4. Description of the “Right On!” Textbooks

Recently, the “Right On!” textbooks of the Dai Truong Phat Publisher have been used as the official textbooks in some secondary schools in Vietnam since 2021. Each grade has seven units, including the Hello or Welcome back unit. Eight parts in each unit are systematically structured and include vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, reading, listening, speaking, writing, and culture or project. Drawing from Phan et al.’s (2020) suggestion on the speaking task adaptation, the current research implements five elements in communicative task aligning with Vietnamese EFL contexts and learners. The following table illustrates these criteria.

Element	Communicative goals
Topic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Being consistent with Vietnamese culture ✓ Being consistent with international integration ✓ Being familiar to students ✓ Being interesting to students

Interaction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Ensuring Student-Student interaction ✓ Ensuring Teacher-Student interaction ✓ Requiring pair work ✓ Requiring group work
Authenticity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Providing real-life situations ✓ Including real-life topics ✓ Being directed to students' real-life experience
Input	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Providing vocabulary relating to the topics ✓ Providing structures or expressions ✓ Including clear instructions
Adaptation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Adding, extending, and expanding ✓ Deleting, subtracting, and abridging ✓ Simplifying and re-ordering

Table 1: Criteria to adapt the speaking tasks (adapted from Phan et al. (2020))

3. Methodology

3.1. Research design

This case study was designed as a descriptive study in which qualitative data was collected. The qualitative data was used to investigate the EFL teachers' practices of adapting the speaking task in the 'Right On!' textbooks. Firstly, the participants were chosen purposely and interviewed in depth to seek their knowledge about the speaking tasks designed in the textbooks and their adaptation. Secondly, the researchers observed their classes to triangulate the data from the interview with their actual practices. The checklist compared their real-life teaching practices with their lesson plans. The reason for choosing qualitative research is that it provides rich insights into complex phenomena (Cresswell & Poth, 2016).

3.2. Participants

The participants were three EFL teachers who teach in a lower secondary school in the Mekong Delta. They all have various teaching experiences. The research was conducted in the second semester of the academic year of 2023-2024. The curriculum they taught was based on Project 2025 of the Vietnam Ministry of Education and Training and the 'Right on!' textbooks of the Dai Truong Phat Publisher.

Name	Gender	Teaching grade	Teaching experience (Years)	Qualifications	Language proficiency	Age
L	Female	6; 8	20	Bachelor	B2	36
P	Male	6; 7	11	Bachelor	B2	30
T	Male	7; 9	11	Bachelor	C1	30

Table 2: Participants' demographic-related information

3.3. Data collection and analysis

The researchers conducted in-depth interviews with those three EFL teachers. In-depth interviews are an effective qualitative research tool for delving deeply into people's viewpoints and experiences. They feature one-on-one talks led by an interview schedule, which allows for more in-depth analysis and questioning of replies than other approaches, such as surveys. They provide rich and detailed data, flexibility and adaptability, probing and clarification, capturing individual voices, and building rapport and trust. (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). After the interviews, the researchers had some observations with the three teachers. They used a checklist to understand their classroom practices and their adaptation of speaking tasks in their textbooks.

A thematic approach was used to analyze the data for the current study. The data was collected in Vietnamese through the above tools, and all sources were transcribed. Only quotes cited in this study were translated into English. The researchers read the transcripts carefully for a nuanced understanding. To triangulate the data and enhance the study's trustworthiness, the transcripts were sent to the participants for checking and clarifying. Ethical considerations were also upheld by obtaining informed consent from all participants, ensuring confidentiality, and adhering to ethical guidelines for qualitative research.

4. Results

After interviews and observations, a sequence of steps depicting EFL teachers' practices on adapting speak tasks was identified and reported as follows:

Step 1: Planning for adaptation based on an understanding of ELT reform

From the data collected from the interviews, the three EFL teachers first understand the innovative ideas in the ELT reform: new curriculum, transition from teacher-centeredness to student-centeredness, communicative competence - final outcomes. "The national ELT reform focuses on skills in which speaking skill is more important than the others. Instead of written text, it helps students to increase communicative competence." (teacher P); "The new ELT helps students to communicate" (teacher L); "The new ELT reform aims to build up learners' communicative competence. After high school graduation, they can use English to communicate... The focus of the ELT reform is no longer content-based; it is competence-based... There is a transition from teacher-centered to student-centered approach" (teacher T).

Secondly, they determine the benefits including facilities, policies, and government support, and drawbacks (of the ELT reform, including students' awareness and motivation, teachers' reluctance to change, testing, and assessment schemes. Teacher P said: "With the help of the government, the investment of new facilities and appliances for teaching and learning English"; "Students' language proficiency and awareness in some areas are low ... the learning attitude is low, too"; "Students' cognition is not as high as other students in towns and cities, parents do not pay attention to their children's study" (teacher L); "There are training sessions, conferences ... Many publishers are involved in designing textbooks so there are plenty of reference books for teachers to choose and apply depending on their students and contexts ... There are piloted classrooms before applying the new textbooks. Not every teacher adapts to the ELT reform, some reject the innovation or are affected by traditional methods... The GCSE exam testing and assessment scheme is not clear." (teacher T)

Besides, teacher T mentioned the right to choose the right approaches and materials for their teaching practice, and they can set up careful plans for their teachers to reach the target (students' learning outcomes). "The final purpose is to increase the quality of teaching and learning English, equip the students with the knowledge to communicate" (teacher P); "Teachers will modify and redesign the tasks to suit with the contexts" (teacher L); "Based on the general curriculum, teachers can choose and design the textbooks and tasks to reach the final learning outcomes" (teacher T)

Step 2: Analyzing and evaluating the current textbook activities

The teachers were asked two primary questions to express their viewpoints about the speaking tasks in Right On! Textbooks. The three interviewees mentioned that the books were designed well and systematically. The tasks designed in the textbooks can help students achieve the learning outcomes required in Project 2025. However, some tasks are unfamiliar to the students since they are regional, challenging, and contain much vocabulary. The three EFL teachers mentioned a great need to adapt the speaking tasks in the textbooks.

The three EFL teachers agreed that time is the most important factor in task adaptation.

"The time is short, only 45 minutes for a period; for speaking skills, we need to have time for students to prepare. Therefore, if there are too many activities in a section, we can flexibly choose the most suitable task that suits students' competence. We develop this task; we can redesign and innovate it to make it more

comprehensible. The most important thing is the guidance from the teachers; they must know and understand the lesson's objectives and what components the speaking task requires in terms of structure and skills. And for the most important task, we will focus on it. We do not need to rely too much on the content of the textbooks because of the limited time." (teacher P)

They also believed that students' level of proficiency affected their rational choice for adaptation. "It seems difficult for the average level of students, especially for those in rural areas, so we must adapt the tasks based on the lesson and the language proficiency of the students." (teacher P); "However, some tasks are difficult for students since they have mixed-level of proficiency, and some students did not study English in primary schools so it is not systematic." (teacher T).

The role of teachers in EFL classes is also a reason for this. "Therefore, the role of the teachers is crucial in adapting, redesigning the lectures to match with the lesson objectives." (teacher P); "Teachers will adapt and redesign the tasks" (teacher L); "Teachers are the ones who actively choose the textbooks for their teaching" (teacher T). Teacher T added that students' motivation and interests are reasons for the adaptation. "The purpose of redesigning tasks is to help students easily absorb the knowledge, to motivate the students and encourage them to practice speaking more often" (teacher T). Based on the document analysis, the three teachers often simplify the tasks, modify the tasks (by adding pictures, videos, music, and articles), and change the tasks into other activities (e.g., from interviews to self-reported activities). Teacher T, however, replaces the tasks with other materials and tasks from other textbooks or authentic materials on the Internet. He also makes the tasks more challenging to activate students' learner autonomy.

"Since the tasks designed in the textbooks are not sufficient enough for students to develop critical thinking skills, I change them into new ones, maybe they are a little bit difficult for them." (teacher T)

Moreover, the 3 EFL teachers sometimes change the tasks to suit the students' background and context. For example, in the speaking task of Unit 4, on page 76 of Tieng Anh 6 Right on!, instead of talking about the special geographical features of the places in the book, the students are asked to talk about the places in their communities or the areas that they live.

"Not all the tasks are familiar to my students; some are based on regional knowledge. Therefore, we must adapt them to provide my students with background knowledge and let them be confident to speak" (teacher L).

Teacher T has the same idea:

"Students can speak confidently if they know the topics. Some topics are familiar to students from the North, so it is important to modify them with their context, or before teaching them, we must provide them more opportunities to develop their ICC knowledge" (teacher T).

Step 3: Executing the lessons with tasks adapted from textbook activities

After observing the three EFL teachers, researchers found that although they tried to follow the procedures and contents in their lesson plans, sometimes they had to change them differently. For example, teacher T tended to expand the topics in his first class (using Tieng Anh 7 Right on). He mentioned, "There are more high-achieving students in this class, so they need to be challenged a little more," but in his real teaching, he also used scaffolding techniques since only 5-6 students could perform well with the tasks designed in his lesson plans. Then, in his next class, he also used scaffolding again. "The students in this class are not as high-achieving as the previous class, so I can not use the tasks I planned; I still use the tasks designed in the textbooks and simplify them a little bit." Teachers L and P shared the same idea on the task designed in their lesson plans and their actual teaching practice; both strictly followed what they planned and used scaffolding techniques when necessary. Teacher L mentioned that her students were not confident enough since they were in grade 6 and were still new to the new curriculum in the secondary school. In fact, "some of my students did not study English in primary school because there are not enough teachers in their school or even there are no teachers there". The teacher added that "the fresher students tend to follow up what the teachers say. They need more guidance from

the teachers to perform well, so I think using the tasks designed in the textbooks is OK since they are authentic and easy to follow”.

5. Discussion and Recommendations

The data collected from the interviews shows that EFL teachers have a positive attitude towards the ELT reform; they did not resist change. They follow the innovation-decision process based on the diffusion of innovations theory, in which, before accepting the innovation, they must understand it. They evaluate it, and they either accept or reject it after implementation. They are still eager to innovate by adapting the speaking tasks to help students achieve their learning outcomes. The three EFL teachers sometimes changed the tasks to suit the students' backgrounds and contexts. For example, with Task 4 in Unit 4 on page 59 of 'Tieng Anh 6 Right on!', instead of talking about the special geographical features of the places in the book, the students were asked to talk about the places in their hometown. However, they mostly simplified the tasks based on their teaching contexts, which sometimes resulted in their unsuccessful implementation of the innovations. The findings also reveal differences between the lesson plans and teaching practices. Teachers tended to create more extensions for their students. However, they changed their ideas and adapted the planned tasks when teaching. Sometimes, the result was different from what they expected. Teacher L only focuses on the product, and the process of learners completing the tasks can not be seen clearly. A pioneering study on language tasks is from Prabhu (1987, p. 24), who sees a task as “an activity which required learners to arrive at an outcome from given information through some process of thought, and which allowed teachers to control and regulate that process.” Teacher L asked the class to look at a picture of a boy and one of a girl in the book, and then she called some to make a sentence to describe their clothes and accessories. It seems to be a form-focused practice by using the present continuous to describe what someone is wearing. Moreover, the tasks in her lesson are monologic, without interaction. We suggest that teacher L get learners in groups to set a true/false quiz to give to another group. For example, 'Becka is wearing a dress'. To increase the challenge if the achievement level in this class is high, the task could be done with the books closed as a memory task. According to Ellis (2009), TSLT “utilizes a structural syllabus and typically involves ‘PPP (presentation-practice- production), with the final stage taken up with what is often referred to as a ‘task’ but more correctly constitutes a ‘situational grammar exercise’” (p. 224). In addition, teacher T lets his students do the task of asking and answering, but it is, in fact, a display exercise, like acting out a dialogue in pairs. However, ‘If learners are given some choice of what to say, and if there is a clear aim to be achieved by what they say in their role plays, they may participate more willingly and learn more thoroughly than when they are told to repeat a given dialogue in pairs’ (Pattison, 1987). This activity is not concerned with exchanging meaning. This means that EFL teachers understand the principles of teaching tasks, but they sometimes seem confused between tasks and drills or exercises. 100% of tasks delivered in this study were done indoors.

The findings can also be analyzed through the Transfer of Learning Theory lens, which examines how knowledge and skills acquired in one context are applied in another. The EFL teachers' adaptation of speaking tasks reflects near and far transfers. The near transfer is evident when teachers modify tasks slightly, such as simplifying or contextualizing them to align with students' local realities, like replacing geographical features in the textbook with places from the students' hometowns. These changes allow learners to relate to the tasks and draw on their prior knowledge, facilitating immediate application. However, the study also highlights challenges in achieving far transfer, where teachers struggle to implement the innovation's intended principles in more complex, authentic teaching scenarios. For instance, while teachers planned extensions or interactive components in their lesson plans, their classroom execution often reverted to traditional practices, such as drills and monologic activities, which limit meaningful interaction and higher-order thinking. This gap suggests that while teachers understand the innovations conceptually, they face difficulties transferring these principles into practice due to contextual constraints, such as limited resources, time, or familiarity with task-based pedagogy. Strengthening professional development to enhance teachers' ability to facilitate near and far transfer could help bridge this theory-practice divide.

As a result, some recommendations can be withdrawn from the study. Firstly, the government, policymakers, and other stakeholders should join hands to support the teachers and students in reaching the final learning goals. Specifically, there should be more training workshops and seminars for teachers to participate in; lesson study should be encouraged in groups so that the teachers have beliefs and do not give up on adapting to the tasks. Next, teachers should invest time and effort in researching and applying something new to activate the students' motivation and expand their knowledge. Suppose teachers only focus on something familiar around them. In that case, students will not be open to the world outside, so teachers need to consider other ICC knowledge from other regions and countries, not just the area's ICC knowledge of the students.

6. Limitations and suggestions

The study examined secondary school teachers' efforts in implementing the new curriculum, focusing on their cognition and classroom practices. However, several limitations should be acknowledged. Firstly, the research was conducted over a short period with a small sample of EFL teachers from a single province in the Mekong Delta. To enhance the generalizability of the findings, future studies should include a more extensive and more diverse sample incorporating EFL teachers from other provinces or regions across Vietnam. Additionally, while most related studies have focused on high schools, primary education remains underexplored. Further research could provide more comprehensive insights into the ELT reform in Vietnam. Secondly, the findings are primarily based on self-reported data from participants. Although the researchers attempted to triangulate the data through document analysis and classroom observations, future studies should incorporate more extensive observations and document reviews to strengthen the reliability of the findings. Finally, as this study is descriptive in nature, future research could adopt an experimental approach. By implementing controlled teaching interventions, researchers could gain deeper insights into the practical challenges and effectiveness of curriculum innovations in real classroom settings.

Vo and Nguyen (2021) and Vu (2023) highlight that while Vietnam is making significant progress in enhancing English language education within its school system, challenges remain in aligning policy intentions with classroom realities. Despite these obstacles, teachers commit to innovation by dedicating time and effort to understanding the curriculum and modifying tasks to achieve learning objectives. Given the findings and limitations of this study, several directions for future research are recommended. Longitudinal studies should examine how EFL teachers' adaptation to curriculum innovations evolves over time or expand beyond secondary education to explore the implementation of ELT reforms in primary schools and higher education institutions. This would help identify challenges and best practices across different educational levels, ensuring a more comprehensive understanding of curriculum innovation in Vietnam. Moreover, future studies can adopt experimental or intervention-based designs to assess the effectiveness of different training programs and support mechanisms in enhancing teachers' ability to implement innovative pedagogical practices.

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Conflict of Interest: The authors declare “No conflict of interest”.

Author Contributions: Author 1 & 2: designing the instrument and collecting data; Author 3 & 4: reviewing related studies, establishing the theoretical framework, and interpreting and discussing data; Author 5: conceptualizing the study and ensuring the quality; Authors 6 and 7: reviewing and editing the report.